

A Sub Rosa

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Category: Star Wars
Language: English
Status: In-Progress
Published: 2000-04-22 08:00:00
Updated: 2000-04-22 08:00:00
Packaged: 2016-04-27 15:09:30
Rating: T
Chapters: 1
Words: 32,875
Publisher: www.fanfiction.net
Summary: All that glitters is not gold

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Prime Priority Part Four - Sub Rosa

Title: Sub Rosa

Series: Prime Priority - Part Four

Timeline: Takes place 22 days after the events of PP3 - First Steps, but works fine as a stand-alone. Obi-Wan is thirteen.

Author: Heavysaber

Archive: Yes, just drop me a note

Fandom: Star Wars - The Phantom Menace

Pairing: none

Rating: PG-13

Category: drama, AU for the JA books

Feedback: Yes, please! To Heavysaber@hotmail.com

Summary: All that glitters is not gold.

WARNING: Anyone who has a problem with needles certainly shouldn't read this.

Spoiler: For the JA books.

Disclaimer: Neither Obi-Wan Kenobi nor Qui-Gon Jinn are mine. Please don't sue me, Mr. Lucas. I don't have anything except my imagination and you absolutely can't have this!

Author's note: This story has been betaed by the wonderful Kat, who again did the most amazing job and keeps my spirit alive. I love you, Kat! All remaining mistakes in this story are purely mine. I hold the copyright on them!

Story Dedication: This story is dedicated to Pumpkin; she knows why... (

Sub Rosa

by Heavysaber

When the unique smell of freshly brewed tea and coffee woke Jedi Master Qui-Gon Jinn in the early morning hours, he knew that his Padawan Obi-Wan Kenobi had either done something his Master wouldn't like or wanted something same Master wasn't likely to agree to. Either way, Qui-Gon had no intention of letting the opportunity of one of Obi-Wan's breakfast creations slip by. The Jedi Master was determined to relish one of the so far rare occasions where his apprentice had risen before his Master and Qui-Gon didn't have to wake the youth repeatedly, who usually savored every single extra minute of sleep his teacher granted him.

Qui-Gon rolled out of his bed and stretched his muscles in the warm light of Coruscant's morning suns. He was now sure that there was also the aroma of waffles and/or pancakes hanging in the air. So this was what Obi-Wan had needed Qui-Gon's credit chip for yesterday. He smiled, glad that his trust in the boy had been affirmed once more. He rubbed the sleep out of his eyes before he entered the living area to check if his nose was as reliable as it used to be.

It turned out that it was. Albeit the Jedi Master had to restrain a wince at the sight of the cooking-area, the looks of the laid table promised to compensate for the catastrophe formerly known as their kitchen. Since Qui-Gon had said more to himself than to his student how much he envied Emjay for a Padawan as skilled in the art of cooking as Ruben, Obi-Wan had made it one of his personal goals to practice his own abilities in this particular subject whenever his duties allowed it. The Jedi Master only hoped he wasn't taking this too seriously. He was supposed to become a Jedi Knight, not a chef.

"I wish you a wonderful morning, my Master," Obi-Wan greeted him, smiling brightly, dressed in one of his new tunics. So far nothing of his Padawan's features revealed the true intentions Qui-Gon knew he had. He decided not to damp his student's mood and to play along.

"Good morning to you too, Obi-Wan." Qui-Gon followed the lead of the inviting gesture his apprentice made towards the table and sat down in his usual place, back to the window. The older Jedi saw his questions as to the exact constitution of the breakfast answered by the enormous variety of food Obi-Wan had served. Apart from the coffee, tea, pancakes and waffles he had already smelled, there were three different juices available, more kinds of bread than he wanted to count, fresh fruits, more cereals than they could eat in a week and about every sort of topping one could buy down in the shops. Qui-Gon had to admit that Obi-Wan really had put a lot of effort into his task of appeasing his Master in order to either confess a misdeed

or to attempt to persuade him into something.

As usual, Obi-Wan took the seat across from his own and they started eating in companionable silence, which was also not unusual for neither of them was very talkative in the mornings. Qui-Gon was wondering when his apprentice would make the first step. He didn't have to wait long.

"Master?"

Here it comes, Qui-Gon thought. "Yes, Padawan?"

"Do you... I mean is there anything special you want me to do tonight after our afternoon training?" Obi-Wan asked seemingly casual.

"Not yet, but you know as well as I do that this can change very quickly. Why do you ask?"

Obi-Wan wriggled on his chair. "Well... You see, I was wondering if I..." the young apprentice stammered, obviously unsure how to put his request.

"Just ask, Obi-Wan," the Jedi Master prompted.

The young Jedi inhaled deeply and followed his teacher's advice. "I would like to watch the MSHL-game tonight. It's the Coruscant Space Tigers versus the Alderaan Avengers." He nearly fired these words out and after he'd ended his face only signaled 'I did it. I may be dead now, but I did it'.

Qui-Gon waited a few seconds, enjoying every bite of the delicious two waffles three toppings combination he had piled up on his plate. Only when his apprentice's impatience nearly screamed at him he said, pronouncing

every word: "Coruscant Space Tigers?" His Padawan nodded eagerly. "Versus the Alderaan Avengers?" Another nod. "So?"

It took a second to get a reaction from his Padawan who had literally held his breath for a few moments. "Master!" came Obi-Wan's exasperated exclamation.

"Yes, Padawan?" Qui-Gon had a hard time keeping his voice steady. Let alone holding back the smile that threatened to show in his eyes and on his face.

Obi-Wan's face turned crimson. "I mean... I thought... this game..." He stopped and tried again. "Everyone in the Temple has been debating this game for days. I thought you knew how important it is for the Tigers ---"

The older Jedi shook his head in disapproval. "How can a game be important for our Order, Obi-Wan? Or for you? Regarding your tight schedule a diversion like this shouldn't even be discussed." With every word Obi-Wan lowered his head more. Qui-Gon cleaned his hands meticulously. "Thank you for the breakfast, Padawan. It's delicious." He rose and made for the bathroom door, but turned after a few steps. "By the way, Obi-Wan," he paused to wait for his apprentice's acknowledgment.

"Yes, Master?" came the unenthusiastic reply.

"I'm quite sure the Tigers won't stand a chance. Not with Gurian injured. Believe me. We'll see tonight how the Avengers kick the Tiger's asses with a vengeance." Inwardly he counted the seconds till his apprentice's face displayed first total confusion, then utter disbelief, and eventually uncertain delight. He made it to three.

"You mean... I may watch it?"

"Under one condition, my Padawan: I'm not going to hear one word of complaint from you regarding the vaccinations we are scheduled for tomorrow." Qui-Gon watched his apprentice intently and inwardly scolded himself for using a trick like blackmail to solve his problems. He saw how the cautious delight changed to discomfort. But, as Qui-Gon had hoped, the wish to watch this game was a little stronger than Obi-Wan's need to openly protest against the injections. He also knew that it wouldn't save him from the inconvenience in the end, anyway, so the youth nodded.

"All right, Master. I guess, that's a fair price."

When Qui-Gon returned from the bathroom two minutes later to resume his breakfasting, his student had regained some of his good mood. He was happily decorating a pancake with syrups of different colors.

"Master Mon-Ahan came here last night when you had retired," Qui-Gon informed his apprentice. "She and I made an appointment for this afternoon's training session. We're planning on a Padawan-exchange." The Jedi Master smiled at the puzzled look on Obi-Wan's face.

"A what?"

Qui-Gon chuckled softly. "Ruben sometimes needs someone who's bigger and stronger than himself to spar with, and I think you could only benefit from a little Force-control with Master Mon-Ahan. So we'll change Padawans for some hours. Many Masters use this method of training on a regular basis."

Obi-Wan looked hurt. "But you can teach me Force-control, too, Master," he objected.

"Yes, but I'm not nearly as good in it as Emjay is. She brings a thread through the eye of a needle without so much as looking at it. Besides, you have to learn to be instructed by and to work with other Masters than myself. Don't worry, Padawan. It'll only be for a few hours."

The young Jedi clearly wasn't any happier with this explanation, but he refrained from any remark that would express his dislike of the arrangement. "I understand, Master."

"Now hurry up with your breakfast, Obi-Wan. I trust you don't want to be late for your classes. And I have to participate in that damn initiates committee. See you at lunch, Padawan." The Jedi Master's gaze lingered on the still heavily laden kitchen table. "I gather we won't have to cook for several days," he sighed. "Do me a favor, Obi-Wan, and store everything away before you go." As Obi-Wan's face

lit up a little at the remark Qui-Gon left his apprentice to fight the desperate battle to diminish the supply of food.

In his room he quickly changed into a clean tunic and combed his hair. He was a little early for his meeting and decided to pick up Emjay. She was the chairwoman of the group and had dragged Qui-Gon into it in the first place. And although he had to agree that the initial idea had been a good one, the endless discussions with the creche Masters and instructors were leading nowhere. The entire experiment was a failure so far.

The Jedi Master reentered the living area and saw that Obi-Wan had cleared away the last evidence of their luxurious breakfast. "Have you taken your proteins?"

The youth turned and looked at him. "Yes, Master."

"Okay, then, I'll be off. Don't do anything I wouldn't do." Obi-Wan's responding snort was cut short by the closing doors.

On his way to his friend's rooms Qui-Gon was lost in his musings about this dreaded committee. It had all begun with Emjay leading a class about basic Force-control for the initiates. She had been shocked to see how much (or better how little) previous knowledge the children had attended her class with. So she had started a little investigation of her own, had pulled a few strings here and there, and her closing report had been so alarming that the Council had called this committee into being and Emjay had been more than willing to take the chair. That's how Qui-Gon had gotten involved into the matter. And being honest with himself, he had to admit that he had foreseen the dead end they were in now. More than seventy children were brought to the Temple each year and the few fistfuls of creche Masters and instructors didn't really have a chance to properly look after them. It was the same problem with the future Padawans. There simply weren't enough qualified Masters available. That was also the reason why the Council didn't like to see a Master without an apprentice or Master-Padawan teams that didn't split up after the student's Knighting. Lifebonded Masters were a problem too, because they generally weren't able to form a decent Master-Padawan bond with a theoretical apprentice.

To Qui-Gon's surprise the door to Emjay's and Ruben's quarters stood wide open. And so did the windows, Qui-Gon saw when he entered the rooms. The environmental control was humming unhappily, almost unable to keep the air in the room breathable for humans because of all the thin air that streamed in through the open windows. He spotted Emjay's apprentice in the kitchen, busied with the dishes. "Good morning, Ruben. Don't tell me this Master of yours overslept."

"Greetings, Master Jinn. Not more than usual. She's in the bathroom. Can I offer you something?"

The Jedi Master almost gasped. "Thank you, but no, thank you. Do I want to know why all the windows are open?"

"Master made breakfast," Ruben answered in a do-I-have-to-say-more voice. Yes, Qui-Gon thought smiling, changing Padawans was certainly a good idea. He loved working with Ruben. And being with Emjay would be a... valuable experience for Obi-Wan, too.

Said Master appeared on the scene. "Making disparaging remarks about your Master, Ruben?" she asked not very kindly. "Maybe going a few days without breakfast would assist you in kicking this habit."

Qui-Gon lifted an eyebrow at Emjay's tone, startled. She was obviously in no good mood. Ruben didn't seem surprised, though. "Never, my Master," he answered her question, bowing low to stress his point and ignoring the fact that she had threatened to starve him.

She threw her apprentice a long derogatory look before turning her attention towards Qui-Gon. "Are we still having this Padawan-exchange?"

"Good morning, Emjay. Yes, we are," he replied with some edge. Two could play that game.

"Perfect. How did Obi-Wan take it?" Emjay was apparently beyond any kind of criticism this morning.

"Not too badly. Although if it hadn't been for the little manipulation he tried on me this morning it could have been worse."

"Manipulation? Tell me."

They made their way out the door and Ruben spoke up before Qui-Gon could answer. "Shouldn't we close the windows, Master? Because of enza?"

That got Emjay started. "Enza? What the Sith are you talking about?"

Ruben's eyes sparkled brightly. "Don't you remember what happened to Knights Sothem and Nacnud last week? They left their windows open and in flu enza."

The female Master rolled her eyes at her Padawan but Qui-Gon could tell that she had a hard time hiding her amusement. Sometimes being moody was a good thing, especially when it made cheering someone up so much easier. Qui-Gon decided to support Ruben in his task to change his Master's current mood so he began with a detailed report of the morning's incidents. As was to be expected, Emjay's attitude lit up against her will. She was inwardly highly amused and her reluctant laughter was contagious. "Bribed with your own resources, Qui-Gon. This Padawan of yours is priceless."

He chuckled. "As is yours, Emjay," he said, smiling back to the young man who followed them but who wasn't looking too happy. Qui-Gon wondered what had happened this morning between Ruben and his Master.

"Don't let me start on this subject, Qui-Gon, or our poor committee members will run riot. Damn, this started so well, but now we are stuck in useless discussions about the Masters' rankings. But who am I telling this to?"

"Don't throw in the towel so soon, Emjay. I'm sure a solution will

present itself."

"You? Qui-baby, I know your opinion about... What did you call them last time?"

"Bureaucratic baboons?" Qui-Gon supplied, deciding to let the 'Qui-baby' stuff slip. This time.

"Exactly. Okay, let's enter the arena," she said, opening the doors of the large conference room where the meeting took place.

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Out of long habit Qui-Gon checked the contents of his tunic's pockets before he changed into an older tunic for the upcoming training session with Ruben, and put the other one into his training bag. He looked forward to it, his muscles were stiff and tensed from the long time spent sitting in that committee meeting. A long, draining workout was exactly what he needed now.

The uselessness, futility, and boredom of the committee had only been interrupted once, when Emjay had filled Qui-Gon in about this morning's affair between her and Ruben in the thirty minute break she had called for around ten. She had made Ruben go around to take orders from the other members and get the little snacks and beverages from the cantina. It was rather unconventional to use an apprentice like a droid but Ruben hadn't protested in any way. Coming to that, he had presented himself as the perfect Padawan during the meeting so far; Qui-Gon hadn't once noticed him fidgeting or something of the kind. Apparently, he knew that he was in some trouble with his Master and after Emjay's briefing the Jedi Master wasn't surprised.

"He came home very late in the night," the female Master had begun her explanation when they were sitting alone at a small table out of the way so no-one could overhear their conversation. "Close to three. That's not unusual, he does that from time to time and as long as it doesn't interfere with his training I'm fine with it. He noticed that he had woken me and came into my room to apologize and for the reassuring pat on the back he likes to get. That's why I'm so certain about the time. Next thing I knew was that it's past six in the morning and that I'll be late for our committee. Ruben was, of course, sound asleep the first time I pounded on his door and told him to hurry. I took a shower and brushed my teeth and guess who's not awake when I came out of the bathroom? Ruben. He knows that I don't like to repeat myself so I went into his room and woke him rather unpleasantly. I interpreted his murmured complaints as signs that he was finally awake and so I started making breakfast. I wasn't angry at him at that time but I was also too tired to be amused, if you know what I mean."

She had continued after Qui-Gon's confirming nod. "When there was no Ruben to be seen ten minutes later I felt the first tiny flares of annoyance rising inside me. Running out of nice ways to wake someone up, I filled a large bowl with ice-cold water and emptied it over his head. That worked! Before he had a chance to get a grip on himself I informed him that we were already late for that damn committee and that he had better hurry if he didn't want to see me really angry."

"I knew I had provoked him and I also know that he hates to be provoked and therefore I wasn't surprised by the defiance I saw in his features and felt along our bond. I chose to ignore it and was almost out the door again when he said: 'I'm not planning on going to that committee, Master. It was your idea in the first place and I really don't see why I should waste my time there.'"

Emjay had taken a deep, calming breath before she carried on. "As you can imagine, that did it. Although I'm sure that I felt a wave of regret for a split second before his shields snapped in place, there was no way I could let this slip. I turned to him, took on the best 'evil Master' pose I manage, and all but growled: 'Young man, you have two choices right now. You either get dressed immediately and join me at this meeting or I'll make you.' With that I left the room to deposit the burning remains of the breakfast. The rest you know," Emjay had ended, obviously relieved that she had told the story to someone.

Ruben had returned from the cantina by then and was distributing the drinks and snacks among the committee members. Qui-Gon had thought about Emjay's story for a moment and eventually had to smile, and after a second his friend joined him. "I wouldn't go too hard on him for this, Emjay," the Jedi Master had said. "You probably ripped him out of a deep sleep phase, which makes everyone grumpy." She had only nodded in response to his words.

Ruben had reached their table and was placing their tea and his Master's small breakfast on the table before he had gracefully knelt next to Emjay on the floor, being finished with his deliveries and neglecting the empty chair. He had neatly folded his cloak around himself, tucked his hands inside his sleeves and kept his eyes on the ground; the embodiment of submission. The Jedi Master had noticed that Ruben hadn't brought anything to eat or drink for himself. Yes, Qui-Gon had thought, he definitely knows that he is in trouble. "I will submit myself to every punishment you deem fit, my Master," the young man had said after a moment of silence as if to prove Qui-Gon's assumption. Knowing his 'authority problem' one might wonder if the young Jedi was only pretending; that he was just an excellent actor devoting himself to his role as an obedient student, but he had been Emjay's apprentice for over four years now and so Qui-Gon was sure that Ruben wasn't acting in the least. The young man loved and respected his Master and followed her lead willingly, authority problem or no authority problem.

In the end the only discipline Emjay had imposed on him was that he was to practice the 'dead man' technique; beginning after the game tonight and ending tomorrow morning, which was quite a long period of time for this exercise and therefore a particularly hard challenge for a Padawan of Ruben's age. "Consider yourself lucky," Emjay had said. "that I overslept myself today. Otherwise you could have forgotten about watching this game."

"Yes, Master. Thank you, Master," Ruben's reply had been. The to-be-on-the-safe-side answer every Padawan was familiar with.

Lunch had been uneventful. Ruben and himself had settled for some salad regarding the hard work-out they had planned and they had tried to discuss the way the committee had developed but it really seemed to be a hopeless point. Whichever way one looked at it, the creche

Masters could only work so hard. Same went for the instructors from outside the Temple. But at least everyone had realized that they had to find a solution for this problem. The current situation was absolutely not acceptable.

Sighing, Qui-Gon brushed this line of thoughts aside and went to get Obi-Wan who was slaving over some sort of navigational exercise Master Mari-T'o had given him as homework. After lunch Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan had made a short detour to their quarters before the actual beginning of the Padawan-exchange. He promised his young student to help him with his problem when they got back, and the pair made its way out the door to meet Emjay and Ruben in the upper practice arena in the first pylon.

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They had split up in front of the gate to the arena and Emjay had advised Qui-Gon to 'take it out' of her apprentice. Now she and Obi-Wan were heading for the Force training room Emjay had reserved for this occasion. Obi-Wan followed her silently through the corridors and she used the few minutes they needed to reach their destination to focus on the boy's feelings, trying to establish some sort of makeshift connection between the two of them. It couldn't be called a bond; it was more like a temporary link. A weak link, nothing one could really rely on but it was better than no connection at all. That Obi-Wan wasn't participating in the provisional linking process didn't make it any easier for the Jedi Master, but the fact that Qui-Gon had only just started teaching him how to shield allowed her to at least get some impressions of Obi-Wan's emotions. Right now - not surprising at all - he was a little scared and tense due to the new situation he was in. It was the first time he was supposed to train with someone other than his Master. Except, of course, for his classes but those were all purely theoretical. A Padawan's Master was responsible for the practical education of their student. Another subject that was currently discussed in Emjay's committee.

They entered the small, windowless room in the middle of the Temple and Emjay gave Obi-Wan a few seconds to take in all the training tools on the various shelves and in the cabinets. Presumably Qui-Gon had never been here with his apprentice before to judge from the way the curious young man glanced around. Her tall friend had never been a marked advocator of these rooms. But they just served Emjay's purpose perfectly. Objects of all forms and variations were waiting here to be moved, piled up, flown around in complicated matrices, or simply levitated by a dexterous Force user. If Qui-Gon preferred to get his quarters messed up by a Padawan who got disturbed while levitating a bowl of tomato soup from the kitchen to the desk, that was not her problem.

Emjay settled down on the soft mat the room was covered with and waved for Obi-Wan to follow her example. Obediently the nervous young man knelt down across from her in the center of the small room. He looked at her expectantly, apparently not sure what to make of the circumstances. "I'm not going to bite you, you know?" she said in an attempt to ease the tension. She didn't get an answer and decided to bring in the bigger guns. She reached inside her outer tunic and produced two lollipops, offering one to Obi-Wan.

Emjay almost smiled at the expression of utter disbelief in the boy's eyes. That had obviously been not at all what he had expected.

Obi-Wan first looked down to the offered lollipop, than up to Emjay again, than curtly shook his head. "Master says I shouldn't eat candy."

Emjay frowned and made a mental note that she had to have a serious talk with Qui-Gon regarding his nourishing habits towards his Padawan. Out loud she said: "Obi-Wan, if I recall correctly, your Master and I are having a Padawan-exchange right now. Meaning that - at least for the moment - you're my apprentice. And as your current Master I order you to eat this lollipop and enjoy it." She waved the item in question until the boy had taken it. She smiled contentedly and unwrapped her own lollipop. Obi-Wan didn't need another hint what to do with the object and began to lick at it enthusiastically. The joy with which he undertook this told Emjay that Qui-Gon's student had a sweet tooth, no matter what this stubborn Jedi Master tried to drill into him.

"Cranberry flavor," the female Master stated around a mouthful of lollipop. They ate in silence for a few minutes and Emjay carefully weighed up whether to start with the exercises they had come here for, or the conversation Qui-Gon and herself had agreed yesterday night that she should have with Obi-Wan. In order to get the uncomfortable stuff off her hands she decided in favor of the conversation. She tried again to get an idea of Obi-Wan's feelings right now and she found him a little more calm than only a few minutes ago. A good sign.

"Obi-Wan?"

"Yes, Master Mon-Ahan," he answered, not fast enough to appear frightened.

"Do you know what a L'Biras Anad is?" she asked him, knowing that he didn't. As was to be expected he shook his head and gave her a curious glance, his thirst for knowledge awakened.

"It's something like a substituting Master, the direct translation would be Guardian Master," she explained. Obi-Wan frowned and shook his head, indicating that he had no idea what she was talking about. And probably that he wasn't even sure he wanted to know what she was talking about.

Emjay decided to try it another way. "You understand that your Master is one of the most skilled in the Order?" Obi-Wan nodded reverentially. "And you realize that because of this he gets sent to the most demanding and dangerous of missions?" Another nod, confused this time. "What I'm trying to say is," she continued, "that sometimes he won't be able to take you with him." Obi-Wan looked at her intently but kept his silence. "He might get injured one day. Or worse." Realization dawned on the boy's face, then it displayed sadness. Emjay hated herself for taking from Obi-Wan the illusion of his Master's immortality. And omnipotence for that matter.

Obi-Wan swallowed before he answered. "So you're saying that I have always to take care of him? To protect him? I will, really," he assured her.

Amazing, Emjay thought, how Obi-Wan's first concern had been for his Master and not for himself. A selfless young man indeed. "I'm sure you will, Obi-Wan. I'm sure you would give your own life to protect

your Master's." The boy nodded anxiously and there wasn't the shadow of a doubt in his eyes about it. "But what I actually meant was: What will become of you if something happens to him? Or more likely: Where will you stay if he's forced to leave you here for a few weeks or even months?"

Obi-Wan needed some time to think about Emjay's question and she was willing to give him all the time he required, meanwhile enjoying her lollipop. She thought that cranberry flavor hadn't been the best of choices for Qui-Gon would see their blue tongues and undoubtedly make the correct conclusions. But what the Sith, he would know anyway.

"I suppose I could stay at our quarters and attend my normal classes. And I could eat in the cantina, I guess," Obi-Wan eventually said.

Emjay nodded. "But Qui-Gon would neglect his duty towards you if he just left you alone like this. Don't forget, Obi-Wan, you're his prime priority now. In fact, you are not only his prime priority but also his secondary and even tertiary priority. And only after those follow the Order and the missions. Your Master is responsible not only for you, Obi-Wan, but also for your correct education. And even if he can't see to it himself, he has to make sure you're properly looked after. You can hardly return to the creche for a few weeks now, can you?"

The boy shook his head and the sad and desperate expression on his face nearly broke Emjay's heart. "You mean another Master would be assigned to take care of my training?"

The Jedi Master nodded, astonished at how quickly Obi-Wan had drawn the logical connection. "Another Master or - in exceptional cases - a Knight, correct. But the decision of who this substituting teacher is lies with Qui-Gon."

"Then who is it?"

"So far, Master Yoda. Because he was Qui-Gon's Master."

"You mean I would have to stay with Master Yoda?" the young man asked, shocked, paling at the mere thought.

Emjay chuckled softly. "Yes, but rest assured. Since I've known Yoda he's never eaten a Padawan. Nevertheless, you could ask Qui-Gon to change the agreement."

Understanding lit up the youth's face. "You're talking about yourself, aren't you, Master Mon-Ahan?"

She smiled knowingly. "You're very smart, Obi-Wan, and you're also right. And if it interests you: If something should happen to me the responsibility for Ruben will be allocated to your Master. It would just be a case of returning the favor. But Qui-Gon leaves the choice to you so I suggest you give the matter thorough consideration before you make your decision, okay?"

"I will, Master Mon-Ahan. May I ask another question?"

"I believe you just have, but yes, go ahead," she said

good-naturedly.

"You already have an apprentice to train and the Code forbids expressly that one Master takes on two apprentices at a time."

Yes, Emjay thought to herself, Qui-Gon has most certainly picked one intelligent young man here. "It's all right when the other Master is just away for some time. And if the worst case occurs it's only a temporary solution until a new, permanent Master can be found," she informed him.

Obi-Wan nodded thoughtfully and Emjay decided that this had gone far enough. "Okay, I've surely given you enough food for thought. Shall we start with the exercises now?"

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They began with the lessons the initiates were introduced to in the classes for Force-control. Obi-Wan moved balls of various sizes from one shelf to the other. It was a repetition of a beginners' course and after a few minutes of effortless demonstration the young Jedi showed the first signs of impatience. More and more of his concentration was wasted on hiding his restlessness than on the actual task.

"Padawan Kenobi." Emjay acknowledged the slight widening of Obi-Wan's eyes at the use of that expression and deliberately ignored it. "Padawan Kenobi, follow me through here. We have to start with the familiar and the known before we can discover the new. We are no runaways. What we leave behind is as precious as what we may find." Still sensing some reluctance in the young man she added, "You wouldn't start your lightsaber training with a free-style, would you?" Obi-Wan's face turned a light shade of red and he shook his head decisively. Emjay sighed, "Why is it that every lecture related to lightsabers and fighting is so easily devoured by you apprentices? I gather it would be easier if any exercise was executed with a drawn lightsaber..."

The apprentice swallowed hard. "I am sorry, Master Mon-Ahan. Can I begin anew?"

"I wasn't mad at you, Obi-Wan. You are doing well. I know that the education in the creche isn't perfect, it's just a second best. That's why I'll be talking basics over and over again. Regard the Force as an additional limb. Like it's a third hand or a another leg or ---"

"--- or a second brain?" the young Jedi supplied cautiously.

"Well, that's an interesting thought." Emjay smiled, glad to see her apprentice-for-one-afternoon relaxing again. "But I won't get philosophical now. There are one or two exercises that might fascinate you after all."

Obi-Wan took a deep breath and closed his eyes shortly before he resumed his former task. He repeated the practice until Emjay sensed that it was done with nonchalance; like one would brush away a lock fallen out of place or pick up lint from a freshly cleaned floor.

That completed, Emjay introduced Obi-Wan to more delicate problems. "It's easier to work with those crude, unbreakable objects than more fragile items, of course. That will be your next step. And now you won't only transport them but balance them out in the air, something like holding the tension."

The young man began to refocus his attention. Emjay retreated to her role as a mere watcher as he worked with the glassy objects she had placed before him. Sweat formed on his forehead and his breathing became more strained. Emjay was content with his performance. It wouldn't take many sessions until Obi-Wan learned that the various Force applications only differed in the attitude attached to them. It was only a matter of perspective. Size didn't matter, strength didn't matter, intentions didn't matter...

"Watch out," Emjay called out, simultaneously directing her attention to the shallow dish hovering in the middle of the room, about a meter above the floor. She leveled it out with a nudge of the Force, careful not to clash with Obi-Wan's concentration he held on the fragile object. It was filled with blue liquid that betrayed every unsteady movement. The Jedi Master loved to work with the dish. It didn't only fulfill its task as an indicator for the skill of the Force user, it was also beautiful.

As soon as she had saved the dish from toppling and spilling its contents she drew back, leaving it to Obi-Wan to regain control. The young man was close to exhaustion. "You may let it down now, Obi-Wan. I think it's time for a small break." She produced two small bottles of juice from the bag she had brought with her and handed one of them to Obi-Wan who had settled down on the floor and cautiously dipped his right index finger in the blue liquid of the training item. "It's only colored water, Padawan Kenobi. Nothing of value."

The young man took the bottle and hesitated a second before he opened it. "Thank you, Mater Mon-Ahan." He took a long sip and then fixed his attention on the Jedi Master who had sat down opposite him, her back resting against the wall.

"Spill it, Obi-Wan," she told him. The apprentice gazed first at her, then at the bottle in his hand suspiciously.

Emjay laughed softly. "No, I mean tell me what's on your mind."

He joined in the laugh. "Why was that so hard?"

"Rephrase your question, Padawan, and the answer will reveal itself to you," she said in perfect mimicry of a certain Jedi Master. Stunned by the imitation of Qui-Gon's expression Obi-Wan just stared at Emjay. She grinned. "Come on, Obi-Wan, you already know the answer. It's not the exercise that's hard," she used her teasing tone to nudge the young man out of his consternation.

Obi-Wan slowly nodded and smiled. "It's me. I was trying too hard."

"Congrats, young man, the jackpot is all yours. It's all in your head, in your imagination. Regardless of the insufficient training you've had so far you must have heard that one thousands of times."

"True, Master. But what's in my head is my only reality."

Emjay kept herself from drawing a sharp breath. Not so much the statement had caught her by surprise, it was more Obi-Wan's tone. It was the first time he had spoken to her unguardedly. And called her Master. She chuckled. "Now where have you borrowed that one from? May I quote you on it?"

Obi-Wan grinned. "It's all yours, Master Mon-Ahan."

"Thank you, Padawan," she bowed her head slightly. "You are right, you form your own reality. However, your access to the Force enables you to expand that reality indefinitely. Force-control will be like a map to guide you. Improve your skills and you won't get lost so easily."

"It sounds so simple."

"It is. And vital."

"Like breathing."

Emjay got up. "You ready to breathe once more? We still have an hour."

"Master Mon-Ahan, may I ask you something..." Obi-Wan paused. "Personal?" he added, remembering her former reaction to this question.

"Just go ahead. I don't promise to answer it, though." She had picked up the dish and placed it on the shelf. When there came nothing from the young Jedi she laid a hand on his shoulder. "What is it, young Padawan?"

"Did Ruben chose Master Jinn as his Guardian Master?"

Emjay studied Obi-Wan intently and reached out along the fragile link to assess the motivation of this question. She found a mixture of feelings there. She sighed. 'Just ask him.'

"Do you envy Ruben?"

Pure astonishment displayed on his face, then realization. "No, no, it's not that. I just wanted to know if he was... allowed to make the decision on his own."

"I understand." A personal question indeed. Emjay was amazed how Obi-Wan managed to surprise her repeatedly. "No, I made the decision. But this is Ruben's story to tell, not mine."

"Master Mon-Ahan, I didn't want to ---"

"No need for apologies, Obi-Wan, no harm done. It was your right to ask, but it's just not mine to answer. Can we continue with your exercises now?"

Obi-Wan smiled. "Yes."

oooOoooo

After another hour of Force exercises the strange pair made its way back to the training arena. Qui-Gon and Ruben were still working, Emjay knew after a quick gathering of the Force. Obi-Wan was in a good mood. To say he was relaxed would have been an exaggeration but he was definitely much less nervous than only two hours ago. "Are you looking forward to our dinner tomorrow?" she asked him to start a conversation. Since Obi-Wan's Athinai she and Qui-Gon had tried to find an evening that suited both of them and after almost four weeks they were finally going to have the promised dinner.

A shadow flickered over Obi-Wan's face. "Yes, Master Mon-Ahan."

"What's wrong? You'd rather eat alone with your Master?"

He shook his head hastily. "No. No, that's not it. It's something unpleasant I have to face prior to the dinner."

Suddenly the truth began to dawn on the Jedi Master. "Ah," she said. "The vaccination." She smiled knowingly.

"Yes," the youth said sadly. "I guess Healer Asdo'r can't wait to get his hands on me. There wouldn't be a way to avoid these injections, would there?" he asked only half-seriously, presumably knowing that there wasn't.

Emjay frowned a little. "Well, there's certainly no way around the shots but there's most definitely one to avoid the Healer. Why don't you ask your Master to administer the medication?"

"That's possible?"

The Jedi Master shrugged. "Actually, it's more than possible. It's common. Ruben has never seen a Healer for a shot. Besides, you have to do it yourself on the missions, anyway. If I were you I would just ask Qui-Gon to do it."

They reached the gate to the arena. "I will do that, Master Mon-Ahan, thank you."

The sight that greeted them when Emjay opened the door didn't surprise the female Master in the least. It wasn't every day that the free style and kata winner of the Bhavani did a free sparring with an apprentice that was not his own. And from the looks of it they had pulled out all the stops. A small audience had gathered around them and was watching the pair intently, some probably sympathizing with poor Ruben because he didn't stand a chance against Qui-Gon. She and Obi-Wan made their way further into the huge room to watch the spectacle from the front-line and Emjay was pleased to see how much of a fight Ruben put up against his superior opponent.

The Jedi Code described fifty-seven possible defense moves for a lightsaber fight but only twelve offense maneuvers. This, Emjay thought, reflected the overall attitude of the Order pretty precisely. On the other hand the Jedi had created their own moves - both attack and retreat - over the last couple of hundred years and added them to their repertoire. Even something so static and obstinate as the ancient Jedi Code couldn't hinder the times from changing and the Jedi from evolving and developing.

Emjay decided that her apprentice needed all the help he could get, told Obi-Wan he should stay where he was, and stepped closer to the opponents, crossing her arms over her chest. For a moment she was distracted by how fast Ruben was making progress in his fighting skills. She herself wasn't nearly as good with the saber as Qui-Gon was and so she figured that Ruben would surpass her when he was about twenty. Well, that was almost four years from now. Probably earlier if Qui-Gon found the time to work with him more often. Emjay took a deep breath and began to analyze her Padawan's movements.

"Watch your left leg, Ruben," she called out, feeling the short wave of joy along their bond as her Padawan noticed her presence. "You're leaving your right side wide open for Qui-Gon's greater range if you place it forward like that in the Joten KyRO attack form. Do it again."

Ruben interrupted his present technique to acknowledge his teacher's instructions, and attacked his rival in the Joten KyRO once more. His left leg stood far better this time and so Qui-Gon wasn't able to run the counterattack he had used the previous time. "Good!" Emjay exclaimed. "Now see that you stay closer to Qui-Gon. The closer you are the harder is it for him to outmaneuver you."

Emjay was glad that Qui-Gon kept the game fair by pretending that he was oblivious of her instructions and tips for Ruben. Although her apprentice gave his very best Qui-Gon was always faster to either block Ruben's assault or to step aside and run a counterattack. Emjay felt the intense level of concentration her student was in and the sweat was not only running down his face but sprinkling from his soaked tunic. Qui-Gon pushed the young man to his absolute limits; and just a tad beyond them. Just as she had asked him to do.

Suddenly their blades crossed and Ruben tried to push Qui-Gon backwards and instead found himself sailing through the air before Emjay even had a chance to warn him. "Dumb mistake, Ruben. Never start playing power-games with someone who's so obviously stronger than yourself. Qui-Gon would have to stand extremely unfortunate for you to have a chance to throw him off balance. You should have retreated immediately," she lectured him while the young Jedi slowly - obviously near exhaustion - came to his feet.

They continued for half an hour longer before Emjay decided that it was enough. Her apprentice really was running on his last resources now. She ordered him to her side and whispered some instructions into his ear. Ruben smiled warily and returned to a waiting Qui-Gon. "The Wai-heh-wai attack form one last time. I'm thirsty."

She observed in amusement how Ruben followed her whispered orders to the point. He assaulted Qui-Gon in the right manner, Qui-Gon blocked the strike with a standard left to right defense, countered - as Emjay had foreseen - with a blow to Ruben's right shoulder but Ruben, instead of parrying the strike, dodged it and brought his lightsaber up with all the speed he could still manage. The tall Jedi Master was surprised by the sudden change of tactics and failed to avoid the saber totally, enabling his younger opponent to drive the yellow blade right through his left shoulder. Emjay knew that this particular maneuver was one of her friends rare weaknesses. "Yes!" she cried out, while Ruben and Qui-Gon bowed to each other and deactivated their weapons, Qui-Gon grimacing and rubbing his

undoubtedly hurting shoulder.

Suddenly Emjay became aware of her surroundings again. The now dispersing crowd murmured and discussed the extraordinary scene they had witnessed. The performance had been highly entertaining even before she had intervened. But now - with the unexpected ending of the exercise - Temple gossip would have new fodder for several days. The great Qui-Gon Jinn out-maneuvered by a young upstart. Emjay refused to imagine the tale that would circle the Temple in a few weeks, knowing the way Temple gossip used to get out of hand.

"Well done, Padawan." She ignored the sweat her apprentice was bathed in and drew him into a short embrace. "Now I can die a happy woman." Her words had been loud enough for Qui-Gon to catch them and the Jedi Master only snorted at her remark. She gave Ruben a pat on his back and a quick kiss on his left cheek and then turned to her friend. "Can I have him back now?"

"You never let him go in the first place," Qui-Gon grimaced, shaking his injured arm repeatedly, in vain trying to relax the cramped muscles, while he gathered his stuff with his other hand. "Do I recall correctly that this is the same young man you wanted to starve this morning?" He turned to his own apprentice. "Obi-Wan, would you be so kind as to massage my shoulder tonight? I took quite the hit."

Obi-Wan nodded, smiling. "Of course, my Master."

The female Master grinned and shrugged her shoulders. "Even if I wanted to... how is he supposed to rip off your rose-colored glasses when he's undernourished, dear?" she teased and was not disappointed.

"Why not? That fight was hardly a fair test. Your joining forces couldn't be foreseen. You're supposed to be cross with him." He paused but before Emjay could retaliate he continued. "Don't say it!" he said in a low warning tone.

"Say what?" Emjay was all innocence now.

"Don't give me that look, Emjay. You know perfectly well what. Expect the unexpected. Point taken." With that he hurried to the shower section, still trying to rub some life into his shoulder.

Emjay made sure none of her triumph showed in her face when she turned to her apprentice who had waited silently. She indicated with the nudge of her head that he was free to go now and joined the young man on his way to the showers, following the lead of his training partner. "I'm very pleased with your performance, Ruben. Your fighting abilities improve with each day."

"Thank you, Master, but I think I'll be sore for at least two weeks."

Emjay thought about reminding him that he certainly wouldn't move too much during the coming night while executing the 'dead man' technique but got a hold on herself. No need to rub extra salt into the wound. Suddenly Emjay remembered the initial number of members their little group had consisted of and turned around to look for Obi-Wan. She didn't have to look for long. The young man in question was standing

on the exact spot where she had told him to stay. "Obi-Wan! Come here," she ordered and the youth followed her instructions immediately. "What the Sith were you still doing back there?" she asked when he had reached her.

"Complying with your orders, Master Mon-Ahan," the boy answered truthfully and Emjay was sure that there was a mischievous twinkle in his eyes.

"Aha," she said with a little mischief herself. "And if I ordered you to jump from the third pylon tomorrow you would do it, right?"

"Of course not, Master Mon-Ahan. Because the Padawan-exchange will be over by tomorrow. In fact, I believe it just ended." He quickly cast his gaze down so Emjay couldn't see his undoubtedly triumphant expression. She could slap herself. Out-maneuvered by a thirteen year old, Emjay, she thought to herself, you're really getting old.

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They had settled down at Emjay's large kitchen table and were reviewing the training in general and the effects of the Padawan-exchange in particular. Ruben had prepared an egg-omelet and put everything into it from bacon to noodles and they were all four devouring it now. Both Ruben and Obi-Wan were checking the time repeatedly in order not to miss one second of the 'important' game they both were anxious to see. Emjay had found an urgent message from Senator Valorum on her account and would be leaving soon to an additional contract-signing in a situation which she had mediated and witnessed earlier this week. They had agreed that Ruben would watch the game in Qui-Gon's and Obi-Wan's quarters so that Qui-Gon afterwards could prepare him and begin the 'dead man' technique; Emjay would pick him up from Qui-Gon's place when she returned from her unexpected meeting.

When both apprentices had left to do some 'really urgent' shopping for the game Emjay first had the opportunity to tell Qui-Gon how her conversation with Obi-Wan had gone. The tall Jedi Master was so happy about the outcome that he refrained from any remark regarding Emjay's bribing methods. "I'm really glad he took it so well, Emjay. I had feared the worst. But it appears that we've made the right choice by letting you talk with him."

The female Jedi nodded and swallowed before she answered. "Obi-Wan's no dreamer, Qui-Gon. He knows that no one promised him a rose garden. Just let the matter rest and he'll either ask you for guidance or come to a decision all by himself. Both should be fine with you," she stated and Qui-Gon nodded his agreement to her words. "Oh, one more thing," Emjay continued. "He has quite the issue with Healers, hasn't he?"

"He talked with you about it?" Everything Emjay had told him so far about Obi-Wan's reactions and behavior hadn't surprised him. But now he was nonplussed.

"Hm-hmmm, and he'll most likely ask you to inject him yourself. Would you please enlighten me why you send him to a Healer for this, anyway?" she asked, evidently not understanding his motives. She stood and began working her way through some drawers on her large

desk. She murmured something unintelligible.

Qui-Gon shrugged his broad shoulders, wincing as that reminded him of one specific saber stroke. "I don't know," he said, thinking. "No real reason, I suppose. Master Yoda made me go there, too."

"Yeah, but Master Yoda has only three fingers!" she pointed out, exasperation detectable in her voice. "Where's this cursed 'dead man' kit?" she asked herself in a low voice.

"No problem if you don't find it. I can as well use mine," he offered right when she had found it before she brought it to the kitchen, handing it over.

"However, Qui-Gon. You might want to check why your Padawan has this reluctance altogether." She put on her cloak while Qui-Gon carried the dishes over to the sink.

"Is there a special reason you want me to do that? Do you sense something peculiar or is it just a hunch?"

"I don't know, Qui-Gon. Call it female intuition. It just seems so uncharacteristic for him, that's all. Okay, I have to be going. Tell Ruben... No, don't tell him anything," she corrected herself just as the doors opened and the two young men emerged. Emjay caught the dark-haired man at his braid, demanding his attention. "Behave yourself, Padawan. I don't wanna hear complaints when I pick you up later. Am I perfectly clear?"

"Crystal, Master," Ruben answered, kept from nodding by the tight grip on his braid. She squeezed his shoulder once and was out the door in a flash with her usual drive.

Qui-Gon sighed for no particular reason. "Everyone ready?" Two Padawans nodded confirmation. "Okay. Then let's move this to our rooms."

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Only fifteen minutes later Qui-Gon's quarters looked like something out of a 're-organize your life' advertisement. Ruben and Obi-Wan worked hand in hand to make the room 'game-ready' as Ruben had put it. Although Qui-Gon didn't understand what being 'game-ready' had to do with removing the living-room table, placing various thick blankets on the ground, and decorate them with enough food for three days but he also wasn't sure he wanted to know and so he kept himself from asking.

The preliminary reports had started and the two boys were in the middle of the last-minute-preparations. The Jedi Master began to wonder if he'd got more than he had bargained for when he had allowed his Padawan to watch that cursed game. If he hadn't been sure about the authenticity of the message Emjay had received, he would have suspected her of having manipulated the entire scene that exposed itself in front of his eyes. 'I can handle this,' he scolded himself. 'I can. I'm... I'm a Jedi.'

Despite the fact that there was only advertising to be seen and nothing indicated that the 'game of the millennium' was about to begin in less than five minutes, the two apprentices settled

themselves in front of the screen. Stupid little sketches were shown, encouraging the spectators to buy ridiculous stuff such as curtains that took on the color of the owner's current lover's eyes or an insurance optimized for the widowed father of three boys and two girls, none of them over the age of fifteen, who lived in a relatively stable part of Coruscant and only left his apartment on three days a week.

Undisturbed by the goings-on on the screen his two charges made a final run for the kitchen to fetch their drinks they had stored in the cooling section. They were back in a flash and resettled down on the floor. Not an easy task regarding all the stuff they'd placed on the blanket. Ruben held a large bowl of salted popcorn in his hand, at a loss where to place it. "Take that for a sec, Obi-Wan." Without waiting for a confirmation he pushed it into the younger Jedi's hand and opened a bottle of sparkling lemonade. Unluckily, the liquid was still too warm or Ruben had just been too careless and both Jedi were covered with a purple fountain. Qui-Gon who had settled on the couch with a few datapads ready to inspect, just closed his eyes and counted to ten, then made it twenty. He heard Emjay's apprentice cursing under his breath. "Why do I bother to wear anything else than bathing suits? Would spare me a lot of time and cleaning tunics."

Qui-Gon opened his eyes just in time to observe Ruben and Obi-Wan race into the bathroom. The Jedi Master fought the image forming inside his head; he really didn't want to know what was going on there. He concentrated on the first datapad, the report of this morning's committee meeting, when the tone of the transmission changed. He looked up; yes, the game was ready to begin. There was a list of the players displayed on the screen, each name enthusiastically exclaimed by the commentator. The boys re-appeared, miraculously not knocking themselves out on the bathroom door and all but tumbled down on the floor. Simultaneously, they reached out for the remote, and Obi-Wan, being victorious in capturing it, turned up the volume by several notches.

The Jedi Master thanked the powers that be that the quarters were soundproof. Though... considering the talks of the last days everyone in the Temple seemed to be eager to witness the match. After all it was the first final and the Tigers hadn't won the title for over a decade. Nevertheless, this was too much. "Obi-Wan, have you turned deaf without me noticing it?"

"Sorry, Master, but..." Round eyes stared at him; the young Jedi was at a loss for words. Ruben didn't hesitate to supply a proper argument.

"It's part of the fun, Master Jinn. It makes you feel the arena's atmosphere." A fanfare thundered through the room, announcing the players now invading the field, a perfect circle of about fifty square meters. Amazingly enough the noise was overrun by the shouts and exclamations of the apprentices who had jumped up in total unison. Ruben produced a large scarf, striped in yellow and black, and swung it over his head. Qui-Gon thought about covering his ears with his hands but then decided to use the Force to block out some of the noise. Maybe he should retire to his room and leave the boys and his quarters to an uncertain destiny. No, this was too intriguing to witness.

The second the anthems started all noise died down. Ruben and Obi-Wan sat down again and dug into the bowl with the popcorn. "Yuck!" Ruben let go his handful. "These are drenched with that damn lemonade." Obi-Wan didn't seem to be impressed and just munched on. Qui-Gon wasn't surprised. There wasn't much food that his Padawan would refuse, except maybe if it was still moving.

"Where did you get that scarf?" the younger Jedi asked his companion.

"I bought it, of course. The streets are full of vendors selling this stuff. But don't tell my Master. She's an avid Avengers fan."

"She is?" Obi-Wan voiced in shock. Both Ruben and Qui-Gon turned in amusement towards the younger apprentice and Obi-Wan continued. "I didn't even know she was interested in Herron ball."

"Well, she isn't that much but she goes on and on about how cute the Avenger's team captain is. So she'd placed a bet on 'Borea and his boys' as Master calls them. She even arranged a private bet with Yoda that the Avengers will beat the Tigers by at least five point difference."

Figures. It was just like Emjay. And Yoda for that matter. Qui-Gon was brought out of his musing by another fanfare. The players took their positions on the field, awaiting the prime referee's signal to start. At his gesture a horn sounded and the offense lines of the two teams headed for the ball lying on the spot in the exact middle of the field. 'Borea and his boys' managed to block the Tigers successfully, captured the ball and made for the first attack. Only the offense players could score, the defenders of the teams were only allowed to hinder them in their attempts to get the ball into one of the seven baskets that surrounded the field. Each basket hovered in the air, controlled by computers, and the height changed in irregular intervals, due to a random pattern, thus making it a game of chance to a certain extent.

During the course of the first of three periods the enthusiasm in the arena died considerably down as the teams were too closely matched. Both defense lines were in top condition and the score after the first twelve minutes was only 4:6 in favor of the Avengers.

"I'll get some fresh popcorn."

"Yes, and don't spare the salt," Obi-Wan called out after Ruben, who had disappeared into the kitchen, the empty bowl in his hands.

"What? You just had the entire bowl for yourself! How can you still be hungry?"

"Well, I'm not. It's just... it's just the feeling of it..."

Qui-Gon shook his head and suppressed a sigh. His apprentice's diet had been corrupted more than enough for one day. How could Obi-Wan make a valid decision about accepting Emjay as his L'Biras Adan when he was manipulated by all that sweet stuff she and her Padawan supplied? He began reading his report. The atmosphere was somewhat checked now. Both apprentices were subdued by the relative lameness of the game and by the fact that their favorite team had the

disadvantage of two points. Not much, but still...

Ruben came back and the two Jedi started a discussion of the game, both devouring the snacks that surrounded them. The Jedi Master stood and made his way over to the boys and grabbed with his right hand into the popcorn filled bowl. He stared hard at his astonished apprentice. "All these sweets aren't doing you any good, Padawan. Especially not in these amounts." His voice was stern and held a slight reprimand, but he was determined to let the issue be and not to press the argument. Nonetheless, he'd had to make his point. Chewing on the corn he went back to the couch, settled down once more and shoved the apprentices' voices to a distant point of his mind, concentrating on his report. Out of the corner of his eye he saw how Obi-Wan's hand at first hesitatingly, then more and more confidently dug into the popcorn again. Well, Obi-Wan was old enough and he'd been warned.

Suddenly Qui-Gon jerked up. Both boys were standing in front of the screen, both shouting at the top of their lungs. Most of it was unintelligible and the Jedi Master could only pick up a few words. "... idiot. Did you see this?" That came from Ruben, intermingling with Obi-Wan's exclamation, "... must be blind and deaf. He just didn't..." Qui-Gon got up and stood beside his charges, trying to figure out what had happened. He was supplied with ample information. He raised his hand in submission and ordered Ruben to explain the situation. He didn't get all of it but obviously the referee had decided to disqualify the Tiger's top scorer because of a foul that only he had seen.

"Damn it. There are only three minutes to go and the Avengers are still leading by one point."

"Watch your mouth, Padawan. I won't have you talking like that."

"But Master..."

"No buts, Obi-Wan. Either the two of you calm yourselves or I will end this spectacle." Grumbling the two boys settled down on the floor again, staring glumly at the screen where the players could be seen in a heated discussion with the four referees. The prime ref ended the scenario by a re-start of the game and the men had to concentrate on their strategies. Qui-Gon kept standing and watched the game intently. It seemed to be a lost one for the Tigers. They had lost one of their players, were a point behind, and the Avengers were in possession the ball. Only two and half minutes more to go.

With a desperate move one of the Tiger's defenders captured the ball and tossed it over to one of his team mates who headed for the nearest basket. He feigned a throw to distract the Avengers and ran over to the opposite basket, the defenders of the other team at his heels. He threw the ball from quite a distance and scored just a second before the horn signaled the end of the game.

For a second the arena and the quarters lay in dead silence and then the ear-deafening shouts began. Obi-Wan and Ruben all but screamed and clung to each other in a weird dance of joy. Qui-Gon threw them a stern look, but they were oblivious to it.

It took the referees some minutes to sort out the pandemonium on the

field. Finally the two captains presented the two players who would play for the victory. It was the first final; so there had to be a decision tonight. One player of each team was nominated. The player who scored first achieved the victory for his team. Borea was to represent the Avengers and Nuban the Tigers.

Obi-Wan groaned at the choice. "Why him? He didn't score once tonight!"

Ruben shook his head. "This is different. He's the best for one on one fights. And he has the most experience."

"Meaning he knows the best tricks?"

"Exactly," Ruben grinned. He clutched his scarf, belying the coolness of his words. Qui-Gon smiled at the young man's eagerness. The Jedi Master was captured by the game despite himself now and concentrated on the screen.

For the final time the ball was placed in the center of the arena and both players got into position. At the signal, both made for the ball. Borea was younger and faster so the Avenger picked up the ball and looked around to pick a basket. Nuban used these moments of hesitation, was on him in a flash and attacked. He twisted the ball out of the Avenger's hands, backed away two steps, turned and aimed for the basket nearest to him. It seemed ages before the ball landed in the basket and all spectators had stopped breathing during those vital seconds. The final score flashed over the screen in the arena and the Tigers' fans broke out in shouts and screams.

Qui-Gon didn't have to check on the apprentices to know they were out of control now. Both were literally bouncing through the quarters, laughing and shouting at each other without bothering about what they were shouting. He just smiled at their display of joy and liveliness.

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Ruben and Obi-Wan were clearing away the major part of the mess such a game naturally created as Ruben had explained to Qui-Gon, while he himself prepared the technique Ruben was supposed to practice. He set up the sensor devices which would monitor Ruben's muscles tone and connected them with the little computer that would control the patches on Ruben's body. The purpose of the 'dead man' exercise was to keep the body in total immobility, while one was simultaneously supposed to watch one's surroundings alertly and - if one was good - regain strength out of the process. It was a very demanding exercise and most apprentices didn't like it very much, considered it boring and inconvenient, not least because of the little shocks they got every time they moved a muscle. The 'dead man' exercise was generally used as a preliminary stage for the Mejis.

Out of good sense Ruben asked to use the bathroom before Qui-Gon attached the patches. The four primary sensors formed a square now in one corner of the room, next to Qui-Gon's desk and the Jedi Master started to program the little computer, which he had placed on said desk. Obi-Wan watched him out of a corner of an eye, curious about the procedure. Ruben came out of the bathroom and looked a little doubtfully at the scene. "You okay, Ruben?"

"Yes, Master Jinn. It's just that I haven't the slightest idea how I'm supposed to get out of this alive." He began to strip so that Qui-Gon could stick on the patches, glad that Ruben was apparently accepting his penalty also at Qui-Gon's hands.

"One rises with a challenge, Ruben."

"That would be better said: One rises with one's Master's expectations." The Jedi Master smiled at the remark and gathered the sticky gel he would need to affix the patches to the young man's body.

"Should I leave?" Obi-Wan quipped when Ruben was about to finish undressing.

"Not for my sake," Ruben said when Qui-Gon didn't answer his apprentice's

question. "You might as well stay and learn what your Master has in store for you once you're a few years older." He took up a position in the middle of the room where Qui-Gon had easy access to every region of his body. He seemed relaxed and calm, Qui-Gon noticed nothing he should worry about. He had crossed his hands over his stomach and was waiting for Qui-Gon to apply the patches.

Qui-Gon sighed once more and decided to start with Ruben's back side and squatted down behind the young Jedi. He took the first patch from the small box - each one not bigger than a thumbnail - and smeared some of the gel onto it before pressing it to the back of the young man's right knee. Ruben winced ever so slightly. "Shh," Qui-Gon tried to soothe him.

"It's okay. Just cold," Ruben explained his reaction.

It took three or four seconds until the gel had hardened and the patch would stay in place on its own. All in all twenty patches would be attached on sensitive areas on the human body, including the genitals. Ruben endured the whole procedure stoically, not even flinching when Qui-Gon spread his legs a little further apart and gently affixed two patches on the most delicate of spots and so Qui-Gon was through with it in under five minutes. "Okay," Qui-Gon said. "Get dressed and then we'll start."

While Ruben put his clothes back on, Qui-Gon explained to his apprentice the basics of the 'dead man' training method. Although Qui-Gon clarified more than once that the slight shocks Ruben would receive from the patches weren't painful, Obi-Wan still eyed the procedure suspiciously, obviously convinced that it wasn't entirely delightful. The Jedi Master hoped that Ruben's reaction would teach him better.

Finished dressing, Ruben resumed his position inside the makeshift square, face to the closed kitchen door, indicating to Qui-Gon that he was ready to begin the exercise. The Jedi Master noticed with a raised eyebrow that the young man had put on his cloak as well. "Why are you wearing your cloak, Ruben?" he asked.

Ruben grinned a little sheepishly. "So I can put my hands somewhere." Qui-Gon smiled. He knew what Ruben was talking about. There had been times where Qui-Gon had actually felt naked without his outer cloak

just because he didn't know where to rest his hands.

Qui-Gon was positively surprised by Ruben's bearing. He had counted on a lot more resistance from this young man, who was famous for his defiance. Ruben apparently trusted him more than he had thought, but Qui-Gon wanted to make sure his outwardly displayed calmness wasn't only mimed. He used the Force to reach out to Emjay's apprentice but his touch was blocked by Ruben's mental shields. They weren't particularly tight but on a high standard level that prevented Qui-Gon's Force probe from seeking any further.

Ruben shot the Jedi Master a short bold look and Qui-Gon thought that he had finally managed to trigger the young Jedi's defiance after all but after a split second Ruben hung his head and deliberately lowered his shields to allow the Jedi Master entrance to his mind. Qui-Gon carefully hid his amazement at Ruben's cooperation; this was almost going too easily. He suspected that Emjay had impressed on him to behave impeccably. Qui-Gon found nothing disturbing. Ruben was tired from the short night and the exhaustion of their training but otherwise calm and only a little annoyed by the procedure. Qui-Gon nodded to himself and saw no further reason to delay their beginning.

He walked over to his desk and laid his hand on the power button of the device. "Okay, Ruben. Stand comfortably, try to relax, and keep your head straight," he instructed the older Padawan. Ruben complied and gave Qui-Gon a curt nod to affirm his readiness. The Jedi Master activated the computer and while Ruben remained absolutely calm, he saw his own apprentice flinch fiercely on the living room couch where he had settled down to study. From now on the sensors would monitor every single muscle of Ruben's and transmit the data to the device, which would, in accordance, activate the twenty patches on Ruben's body should the young Jedi move. Those patches would administer small amounts of electricity to the body, but not enough to cause actual pain. Ruben would feel a superficial inconvenience, reminding him of the fact that he had moved which he wasn't supposed to do. Only movements of his pupils and his eyelids were tolerated so the young man could watch his surroundings (one of the basic intentions of the technique) and wet his eyes. And of course, swallowing and breathing wouldn't cause a reaction either.

Qui-Gon watched the young Jedi a few moments longer before he suddenly remembered Emjay's hunch or whatever it had been. He quickly activated his comm-station and filed a request for Obi-Wan's complete medical record. The automatic reply assured him his order would be fulfilled within the hour. Satisfied, Qui-Gon wanted to head to the kitchen to make something warm to drink.

"Master? Could you help me with this navigational problem now?" Qui-Gon smiled and redirected his steps to join Obi-Wan on the couch. Tea could wait.

ooo00ooo

Qui-Gon spent the time between his request and the arrival of the record helping Obi-Wan with his homework. Not that he needed a lot of assistance but Qui-Gon used the opportunity to refresh his own knowledge. Every time the low humming tone marked that electricity was floating through the patches, Obi-Wan winced beside him. He didn't seem sure whether to throw compassionate looks to Ruben or

accusing glares to his Master.

"He didn't move, Master! I saw it; he didn't move and the machine hurt him."

"Perhaps he just twitched a toe or a finger inside the sleeves. And it's not hurting him, Obi-Wan," his Master explained for what seemed the twentieth time. If his apprentice asked one more time if it really, really and absolutely wasn't painful, he would interrupt the exercise, put one or two patches on Obi-Wan, and activate the computer just to show him that it indeed really, really and absolutely wasn't painful whatsoever.

The older Padawan did well. Once the Jedi Master had to deactivate the machine with a tendril of the Force. It had gone off repeatedly and Ruben had tried to shift his weight from one foot to the other. As it turned out, his right calf had cramped and Qui-Gon had massaged it a while and then made Ruben walk in circles for a few minutes until his muscles had relaxed again before reactivating the device.

Ruben himself wasn't too fond of the whole situation, but either didn't dare to protest or knew it was futile and saved his breath. Either way, Qui-Gon was very pleased with the young man so far although he foresaw that Emjay would have to call an end to the exercise before the morning. It was most unlikely that a sixteen year old apprentice could make it through the entire night.

As if that thought had triggered it, Ruben heaved a sigh, producing the programmed reaction from the device. Instead of falling back into his trance-like stance like he'd been able to do so far, the young man became more and more restless. Qui-Gon reached out with the Force and the first thing that touched his mind was the horror of his own apprentice. He shoved it aside, gently but firmly, and scanned for Ruben's feelings. He found the young Jedi highly alerted; something was wrong. The initial movement hadn't been physically generated, Qui-Gon was sure of that.

Cautiously he forced Ruben to take down the shields the apprentice had built up again, unintentionally it seemed, as if in a reflex to protect himself. His probing was successful and a clear picture formed in the Master's mind. Emjay. Ruben reached out for his Master, almost desperately. In a split second Qui-Gon was at Ruben's side, switching off the computer. Ruben relaxed a little and slumped forward. The bigger man feared he might faint and grabbed his shoulders, steadying him. He felt the body still trembling. The young man's eyes were dilated as if he'd just awoken from a dream.

"What... Whe... Where is my Ma...ster?" he brought out with difficulty, staring hard at Qui-Gon.

The Jedi Master touched the apprentice's cheek with his left hand and said quietly, "Try to remember, Ruben. Where are you?" He sent out calming thoughts and pictures to support the effect of his talking. All the time he was aware of Obi-Wan's presence but there was no time to change that now. First he had to get Ruben back. Somehow his own Padawan realized he was of no help and retreated, both mentally and physically. Qui-Gon was relieved when the strain on their bond relaxed and Obi-Wan backed away. The Jedi Master nearly

smiled.

Ruben blinked several times and his eyes took on their normal deep brown color. "Master Jinn... What happened?"

"You lost control during the 'dead man' technique, Ruben." He let go of the apprentice's cheek, but let his other hand stay in place; a rather symbolic gesture since the young man had regained his hold on himself.

"My Master... she hasn't returned yet from her assignment?" If this should have been a statement it was an insecure one. Qui-Gon scanned Ruben's condition once more and found the source for the young man's feeling. Fear. Fear that Emjay had left him here for the entire night. Fear of abandonment.

Qui-Gon smiled reassuringly. "I'll expect her any minute now. It's not that late... and you know how tenacious bureaucratic issues can be."

Ruben nodded eagerly, as if the very movement could convince him of the truth the Jedi Master had offered him. "Shall we continue now?"

The older Jedi marveled at the young man's spirit. He was a fighter for

sure. Qui-Gon suppressed an 'If you feel up to it' and was about to re-activate the computer when Obi-Wan appeared at his side.

"Is he all right?"

"He is fine, Obi-Wan," Ruben supplied, stressing the first word, and grinned. "You can trust your Master's words. This isn't hurting a bit."

Qui-Gon saw from his Padawan's expression that he refused to let go of his

doubts. Stubborn. Qui-Gon shook his head. Or determined. Whatever word he chose to characterize his student, mere talking wouldn't help here.

"May I prove it to him, Ruben?"

The older apprentice nodded, his eyes sparkling. "Padawan, stretch out your arm and roll up the sleeve." After a moment's hesitation the young Jedi followed his order. Qui-Gon shoved up the sleeve of Ruben's left arm a little, removed the patch and re-fixed it on his Padawan's arm, a little above the wrist.

"Ready?" he asked. Obi-Wan nodded once, slowly.

Qui-Gon activated the program. "Move a bit, Ruben." The older Padawan complied and Obi-Wan's eyes rounded in astonishment.

"But that was..." he paused, staring at Qui-Gon, nonplussed, "nothing..."

His Master gave him a told-you-so look, deactivated the machine,

re-applied the patch to Ruben's arm once more and watched his Padawan return to his books, clearly relieved judging by the spring in his steps. Qui-Gon sighed audibly. When he looked up he found Ruben grinning mischievously.

"Kids," Emjay's apprentice stated. Qui-Gon couldn't hold back his own amusement any longer and smiled. He nearly tousled the young man's hair but instead he only gave him a slight pat on his shoulder.

"Ready?" and after Ruben's affirmation he switched on the program. Qui-Gon reached out with the Force once more. Yes, there shouldn't be any problems. The apprentice was relaxed and calm. The Jedi Master rubbed his eyes and returned to his desk.

Leaning back in his chair he observed his two charges. Obi-Wan was obviously content now, a look of concentration on his face as he solved the problems Qui-Gon had pointed out to him. And Ruben just stood there, breathing regularly, the heaving of his breast the only movement apart from the occasional blink of his eyes. As if nothing had disturbed his trance in the first place. Emjay could be proud. And Qui-Gon was proud to be his Guardian. It was more than getting the opportunity to train with a more advanced educated, challenging, and older partner, although this had been the most prominent reason for taking over certain aspects of Ruben's training. In good time Obi-Wan would be just as demanding as a fighting partner, but for the time being Qui-Gon enjoyed his sessions with Emjay's Padawan. But it was more than that. He actually liked the young man. He had spirit, wasn't easy to handle and had a mind of his own. Qui-Gon smiled. Ruben had the potential to become an exceptional Jedi. If he overcame his weaknesses... Emjay would see to that, Qui-Gon was sure.

He was ripped out of his cogitation by a signal from his desk computer. He suspected that the data he had made the application for had arrived. He wasn't mistaken. He downloaded the record into a datapad and settled with it and the tea he had finally managed to brew on the couch. He didn't share Emjay's concerns but it wouldn't hurt to check, would it?

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During the next fifteen minutes or so Qui-Gon's frown deepened steadily and he could feel a lump building and growing in his stomach. According to this record, Obi-Wan had repeatedly spent several days in the infirmary when he was about three and a half years old. This wasn't the reason for the lump, the reason was that there was no cause given. Neither was any comment made as to the treatment or medication. This fact itself wasn't so remarkable, either. The fact that it happened repeatedly was. Apparently, Obi-Wan had spent several weeks in the infirmary. Not in a row but with interruptions of sometimes just a day or once a whole week. It seemed Emjay's intuition had proven legitimate after all.

"Obi-Wan? Come here to me, please." His student complied, leaving his books on the floor where he preferred to study, and joined his Master on the couch with a questioning twinkle in his eyes. "Padawan, have you ever spent any length of time in the Healer-building?" Qui-Gon asked straight away and the youth's eyes widened in shock and his skin paled a shade or two.

"No! Master, no. Never! Thank the Force," Obi-Wan said without thinking before he realized what he had said and flushed. "I... I meant, no I've never had to stay there overnight, Master, and I'm thankful for it because I don't... like the infirmary very much, Master," Obi-Wan shyly admitted a fact Qui-Gon had been aware of since their second day together.

The Jedi Master smiled in a way he hoped was reassuring and ruffled his Padawan's hair. "I know, Obi-Wan. It's all right, don't worry. It was just a question." He dismissed Obi-Wan to his homework again, his brain working double shifts. He had feared (or hoped?) that the boy had forgotten about the incident. He immediately discarded the possibility that his apprentice had lied about his ability to remember the event. He was as sure that Obi-Wan had told the truth as he was sure that he owed Emjay a thorough thank you. Unfortunately Qui-Gon liked neither of the two remaining possibilities, which were a) that someone had - deliberately or not deliberately - entered false information into Obi-Wan's medical record or b) that someone had 'forgotten' to record the additional data for a very good reason. A reason Qui-Gon had yet to find out about.

The 'dead man' device made its buzzing sound again and Qui-Gon looked up to check on Ruben. The young Jedi was smiling and the Jedi Master knew that Emjay was back. Not even a minute later the door chime sounded and Qui-Gon opened the door for his fellow Master. She threw him a odd look and the tall Master suspected that she could probably read something about the knot in his stomach on his face.

Ruben got another shock from the patches and that finally drew Emjay's attention to her exhilarated apprentice. The female Master deactivated the machine and her Padawan instantly used his regained physical freedom to lower his head so he could rest his forehead on her shoulder. Qui-Gon had to smile at that scene; however self-confident Ruben might appear, he still needed the strength and the guidance of his Master desperately. Most people outside the Temple underestimated the bond between Master and Padawan by far. Jedi apprentices could never do what they did without the mental and personal support from their Masters. They were children who were denied childhood and instead taught to negotiate, to mediate, and to fight. And sometimes to kill.

Jedi Masters were required to be mother, father, teacher, trainer, and best friend all simultaneously for their Padawans. A Jedi apprentice without their Master was like a carriage without a horse. Sometimes the Master was like a single prospering flower in a garden of weeds. Qui-Gon could still vividly remember how hopelessly he had depended on Yoda. There had been times where the ancient Master had been the only reason for Qui-Gon to continue his training in the field instead of volunteering for the AgriCorps. Especially at times when they had waded their way through another bloodbath they hadn't been able to prevent.

"You shielded," Ruben accused after a few seconds of silence.

"I'm sorry, Padawan. But that damn Senator with his old-fashioned perspectives really pissed me off. And I didn't want to disturb you with my emotions running wild like they did. Did you behave?"

Ruben lifted his head and looked over to Qui-Gon, who deliberately kept his features expressionless, and then nodded a little

uncertainly. "I think so, Master." His Master nodded approvingly and gently squeezed the young man's shoulders.

Qui-Gon suddenly realized that he wanted to talk to Emjay about what he had found out and that he didn't want to do it in front of the two apprentices. Obi-Wan was so quiet and respectful that the Jedi Master had almost forgotten him. "Obi-Wan, please help Ruben to pack up the sensors and the computer. Emjay? Could I have a private word with you in the kitchen and no, it's not about Ruben." His friend nodded and he led the way to the kitchen, handing her the datapad he had worked with when they were inside. The female Master studied it for some moments and then nodded slowly.

"It's nothing clearly indicative but it's sure as Sith strange. Have you decided what to do in the matter? Have you talked with Obi-Wan about it?"

"Obi-Wan doesn't remember it and I figured it wiser to keep it that way for now. I'm planning to pay a visit to the Healers and demand to see the visual records of those times. Actually, I was just waiting for your return so I could go. I have a bad feeling about this, my friend, but I can't put my finger on it."

"I know what you mean," she said compassionately. "By the way, did Ruben really behave?"

Qui-Gon inclined his head curtly. "He did. I was relieved and surprised how little resistance I encountered during the exercise."

She smiled ruefully at him. "You know, Qui-Gon, I think you're the only one who's able to handle him at least somehow. He fought the authority of every other Master I let him work with so far."

"I take that as compliment."

"Okay, then let's go," was all Emjay answered before making her way to the living area again to collect her Padawan so they could leave.

Qui-Gon gathered his own cloak from the wardrobe. "Padawan, I'll be gone for an hour or so. I expect you to be in bed when I return, all right?"

Obi-Wan looked up from his studies, a frown on his face. "But I thought you wanted me to massage your shoulder, Master?"

"Another time, Obi-Wan. Not tonight. Sleep well." Emjay and Ruben also wished Obi-Wan a good night and the three Jedi were on their way to the elevator. Qui-Gon nodded his farewell to the other two when they entered the first car. He waited for the next one for he needed to go in the opposite direction.

"Good hunting," was all Emjay said for a good bye.

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Half an hour. It had taken half an hour to get through to Healer Refron's personal assistant. Qui-Gon didn't worry that anything of his built-up impatience, his increasing concern over his Padawan's

past and above all his pent-up anger was showing in his words or his expression. He knew he looked... composed outwardly. Years of training and experience enabled him to let others see what he wanted them to see.

"All I can do for you, Master Jinn, is give you an appointment with Healer Refron. He's unavailable now." The Gorian showed white sharp teeth in what was obviously a friendly smile. The Jedi Master only saw a mocking grin.

"I don't need an appointment, not with your superior, nor with another being who informs me that he, she or it isn't allowed to grant me my request. All I need are those reports - the complete files. No is not an acceptable answer."

"It's the only answer I am entitled to give you, Master Jinn. I will introduce your... case to Healer Refron and he'll get in contact with you as soon as he returns from his home planet."

The tall Jedi Master took two steps forward, straightening his back. He had refused to sit down and listen to another variation of polite excuses and evasive explanations. All that was getting him nowhere. All he had learned by now was that there was something wrong. Unluckily Gorians were completely Force insensitive. Well, there were other means. And Qui-Gon wouldn't hesitate to employ those.

"I don't think this will be necessary, Karaldim." He gave the Healer's assistant a curt nod and left, certain the man would use the comm-link as soon as he had left the room. Well, Karaldim wasn't the only one who would have another conversation...

On his way to Yoda's quarters he activated the device to get in contact with his former Master. An automated recording informed him that the old Jedi had deactivated his personal comm-link. Qui-Gon suppressed a curse and made another call. In answering his inquiry the Council's secretary refused to pass on his request. He spared himself an answer and headed for the Council's pylon. One more 'Sorry, your request cannot be granted,' and he'd probably lose his control after all.

With long strides he hurried through the corridors and entered another elevator. During the ride he reflected upon the arguments he had used on the various personal and not so personal assistants and on the assistants of assistants. Every single reason he had given them had been countered by non-committal smiles. With every excuse his own determination had grown. Now his desire to find out what had happened to his Padawan had turned into a need that blocked out any other thought.

This was going to be a first. Never before he had consciously taken advantage of his relationship to Yoda, the head of the Council. To be honest, there had never been the need for exploiting this fact. After all, utilizing one's connections was the top gun of diplomacy. A weapon that had become rusty in Qui-Gon's hands. Now he was ready to wield it, for the sake of the most important person in his life. The thought of Obi-Wan made his heart ache and his breathing laborious. His futile attempts to access those cursed reports might have damaged his pride. His helplessness angered him. All those feelings didn't matter. All that did matter was that he had to uncover the truth. For Obi-Wan's sake. To help his apprentice. Nothing else

mattered.

Qui-Gon exited on the floor the lounges were located. He reached out with the Force and went on, almost running. Ah, the terraces. They gave access to an impressive view, especially at night. Yoda often held congregations there.

The Jedi didn't need long to spot his former Master in an animated discussion with the dignitaries of various species. What looked like an informal meeting was a social occasion of some importance; otherwise Yoda wouldn't have deactivated his comm-device.

The old being looked up, acknowledging Qui-Gon's presence. He stopped in mid-sentence and excused himself, making his way to his former apprentice. Qui-Gon was relieved he didn't have to drag him out of the room, though he had been prepared to do just that.

"Follow me you will," Yoda stated and passed him on his way to another meeting area. When the two of them were out of earshot the old Jedi faced Qui-Gon. "A good reason you need to explain this." He was clearly annoyed.

"Obi-Wan."

Yoda's stern gaze softened somewhat. Still all of his aura said 'This better be good'. "Dragged me out of a diplomatic reception to tell me name of your apprentice, have you?"

Qui-Gon swallowed the smart remark and only needed a few minutes to enlighten his former Master, telling him of Emjay's suspicion and his futile investigation. It was hard to recognize a frown on Yoda's wrinkled face but Qui-Gon felt astonishment and not just a little anger in the ancient being.

"Return to your quarters. Those reports, delivered to you they will be. Within this hour."

"Thank you, my Master," Qui-Gon replied, a considerable part of the tension he had been under dissolving into nothingness. He didn't wait for another remark from Yoda, certain there would be none. In a very short time he would *know*.

oooOoooo

Back in his own rooms, Qui-Gon was pleased to see that the lights were dimmed, the living area had been cleared up a little, and Obi-Wan had retired. He quietly opened his student's door to peek in, but although the lights were off the young Jedi wasn't asleep. "Master?" he voiced carefully.

"Yes, my Padawan?" Leaving the lights off, Qui-Gon sat down on the corner of the bed. The incoming illumination from the living area was enough to see the strained expression on Obi-Wan's face. "What's troubling you?"

"It's about the vaccination," the young man admitted shyly and then added hastily, "but it's not a complaint, really!" before Qui-Gon could remind him of the promise he had made that morning. The Jedi Master didn't say anything, just calmly sat there. He started gently stroking Obi-Wan, waiting for the young man to find the right words,

albeit he probably already knew what this was about. "I... I was wondering if maybe you could..."

"Administer it?" Qui-Gon supplied and Obi-Wan nodded, flushing, obviously a little ashamed. "Of course, I will, Padawan, if you prefer it. Had I known how you feel about it I would have injected you the first time myself, too," he assured him, when the strained expression on Obi-Wan's face turned into a relieved one.

A brief check via the Force disclosed Obi-Wan's state of mind; obviously Qui-Gon's honest and carefree answer to his plea had destroyed his embarrassment, on the other hand a low throbbing of fear seemed to accompany his student's gratitude. The Jedi Master didn't give in to

his impulse to stay. To prevent his student from interrupting Qui-Gon's inspection of the files he was expecting, he needed Obi-Wan asleep. Better to leave him alone.

"Sleep now, Obi-Wan. It was an eventful day." He smirked a little at the expression. 'Eventful' was a colorless description. But then his lack of eloquence was hardly something he had a mind to reflect on now.

"Yes, Master. And thank you." Obi-Wan stifled a yawn.

"No need to thank me, Padawan. Good night." He stood up and his shadow fell on the young Jedi's face. Qui-Gon had never allowed himself to follow the dangerous paths of superstition, but at that moment... Obi-Wan looked so young and vulnerable and the man's determination to protect him was so overwhelming that he hastily left the room, closing the door behind him. If he only knew... Well, he wouldn't have to wait much longer.

He fled into the only occupation he could think of right now. Making tea had always been kind of a ritual for him. The familiar preparations calmed him, telling him there still was sanity and normality to be found in this universe. Obi-Wan's request... he had been expecting it, of course. Nonetheless it had been like placing a finger in an open wound. And it was futile to linger on the fear he had been unable to take from his Padawan. He had to open some closed doors and follow some dark leads before he would be able to attack Obi-Wan's dread.

The water started boiling and Qui-Gon prepared the first infusion. When he was about to dispose of the liquid the chime went off. He nearly burnt himself in his successful attempt to prevent the tea pot from breaking as he had set it down hard in the sink.

The tall man hurried into the living area. "Enter." It was Karaldim, holding a stack of data chips in his hands. How typical of Yoda. Qui-Gon knew the small being's temper from first hand experience and now felt almost sorry for the man. Almost. The assistant hardly met Qui-Gon's inquiring stare. Well, Qui-Gon thought a little meanly, if the prophet refused to come to the mountain, the mountain would have to come to the prophet.

"Master Jinn, here are the requested reports. Copies of them to be precise. They're yours to keep." Karaldim handed him the items, finally looking up, waiting for a reply.

Take the damn chips and kick him out, a small devil on his left shoulder told Qui-Gon. Although there wasn't the appropriate opponent on his other shoulder the Jedi settled for staring the assistant down, before he let him off the hook.

"Thank you for the pains you've taken on my behalf." Knowing Yoda that shouldn't be too far from the truth. Still, the bureaucrat had displayed the stamina to present him with the information as if everything had gone according to standard procedure.

Kaldarim left, sparing him any further exchange of polite remarks. Qui-Gon placed the chips on his desk and went into the kitchen once more, pouring himself a large mug of tea. He didn't bother to make a second infusion, he would probably need the stimulating effect of a strong brew.

Settling down in front of his computer he took a sip and grimaced at the bitterness. Stimulating or not, that was disgusting. He set the mug aside and, after confirming that his Padawan was asleep, inserted the first chip. Show time, he thought, wondering for a second if cynicism was an emotion allowed for Jedi. He stared at the screen. The first entry appeared.

ooo00ooo

Qui-Gon downed the mug of tea, gone long cold by now, ignoring the awful taste. It left him a little breathless and he closed his eyes and calmed himself and his breathing. He opened his eyes and his gaze was drawn to the now dark screen. What he had witnessed... he could still see it, and in his ears there were still the echoes of...

The Jedi was grateful for all the lessons in discipline and self-control Yoda had drilled into him. Without his abilities he would be running to the Healers' section this very moment. But he wished he could just act on impulse, not being held in check by his education and his beliefs. It would have been so easy to crack some heads for that. Easy is the way to the Dark Side indeed. Qui-Gon snorted at the thought. Labeling emotions as 'good' or 'bad' was as far from the truth as the illusion that everything evil could be captured in such a simple concept.

He ejected the last chip and made a neat pile out of them. Seven in total. While he was viewing those he had constantly checked with the Force that Obi-Wan hadn't woken. What he had seen had left him, well, helpless and angry, feeling sick to his heart. He could deal with his anger; it was an emotion he could handle. But that left the helplessness that gnawed at him. There was always the possibility of meditation. Maybe that would be the wisest choice.

He picked up the comm-link and established the connection. Good, no automated response this time. Probably Yoda had already retired and...

"Yes?" came the hiss.

"Master, it's..."

"Of course, Padawan." Qui-Gon recognized a fair amount of irritation in his former Master's voice. He must have been asleep.

"Sorry that I woke you but I need to see you."

"Still at the reception I am, Qui-Gon."

"Then why did you activate your comm-link?"

"The reports, receive them you did?" Yoda didn't answer Qui-Gon's question.

"Yes, and watched them too. That's why I'm calling you." A suspicion materialized. "Did you know about their content?"

"Known it I have not. Guessed it I might have."

"I need to show them to you. Can you leave the reception, Master?"

"Over 800 years old I am. Enough reasons for a proper excuse it will provide."

"Please meet me in Master Mon-Ahan's quarters."

"Kill you she will, if her beauty sleep you interrupt," came a cackle over the link.

"Her Padawan is running the 'dead man' technique."

"Meet you there in ten minutes I will, Padawan. Not much expect of me you will, though. The boy... survived it he has." The connection went dead.

Qui-Gon sat back in his chair, putting the comm-link into his pocket. Yes, Obi-Wan had survived. Nonetheless, no one should have the right to harm a child like that. They had left their mark on him, scarred his soul. No wonder Healers and infirmaries scared the Sith out of his apprentice, not after the doubtless traumatic experiences he had had in his early childhood. Qui-Gon felt his fingernails dig painfully into the palms of his hands as he unconsciously clenched them into fists at the thought.

The Jedi put on his cloak, picked up the chips and - after a final check on Obi-Wan - left his quarters. Five minutes later he stood in front of his friend's place and activated the chime.

Emjay opened the door for him and jerked her head, indicating he should enter. In the lounge he found Ruben, standing at the opposite wall. He picked up the young man's calmness and relaxation. He was glad Emjay's apprentice had passed the critical points and was convinced he would end the procedure successfully. The Jedi Master nodded to him and Ruben acknowledged his greeting by closing and re-opening his eyes. Qui-Gon smiled and turned to Emjay. She'd closed the door and now leaned back against it.

"These are the reports," she stated. "And it's worse than you expected."

"Is it that obvious?" he asked, knowing it was.

"You're broadcasting your feelings loud and clear. I would have to be

blind, deaf and probably dead not to recognize it. And you might want to check on your shields."

Qui-Gon grimaced and decided to buy some time, not being prepared to tell the story twice. He had to wait for Yoda's arrival. "Your Padawan is doing well."

"Excellent to be precise. He didn't even react to the chime."

"Impressive." He meant it, but his heart wasn't on this subject. Emjay realized it, too.

"Okay, Qui-Gon, let's skip the small-talk. You want me to watch the chips?"

"Yes, you and Yoda. I asked him to join us. He'll be here any minute."

Emjay grinned mischievously. "My house is your house, Qui-Gon."

"I couldn't risk waking Obi-Wan," he justified his decision. For the first time during the whole evening he realized how much he had taken for granted in his desperate attempt to protect and help his Padawan. He had dragged Yoda, head of the Council, out of an important meeting twice. He hadn't bothered to inform Emjay about his plans. Reckless. Without consideration for others or other issues apart from his apprentice's well-being.

"No, of course not. And it's a welcome distraction. The committee's reports are even more boring than the actual thing if that's possible."

Qui-Gon frowned at Emjay's words. "Welcome distraction is hardly the expression I would use to describe... this." He stared at the chips in disgust. He felt Emjay's gaze on him and looked up to face her. "Sorry, Emjay. I didn't mean to take it out on you."

"Always happy to serve as a punching bag for you." She smiled and pulled him down for a small embrace. Every time she did that Qui-Gon marveled at her strength. And, as usual, he was comforted by the gesture.

The door chimed again and Emjay went to let Yoda inside. Qui-Gon activated the computer in her sleeping chamber and prepared his demonstration. It wouldn't do Ruben any good if he witnessed what was to come, even if he only heard it. In a way, only hearing it would be even worse.

Qui-Gon had already marked the scenes he wanted to show them. He put the record on standstill and joined Emjay and Yoda in the lounge. The small being inspected the stoically standing apprentice and then threw Qui-Gon a look. "Memories this brings back, Qui-Gon?"

"Actually not, my Master. You never bothered to give me that much preparation for the Mejis."

"Need it you did not, Padawan. Waste of time it would have been. Too precious a resource it is." Qui-Gon was confused by the last

sentence. Yoda never used such commonplaces without purpose. But right now he had no clue of what was on his former teacher's mind. And Yoda didn't leave him much time to puzzle it out.

"Speaking of waste... wonder how many patches you used on him I do," the old being asked his friend.

"The whole kit, Master Yoda," she answered and Qui-Gon could almost hear her adding, 'What kinda dumb question is this?' quietly in her mind.

"Done it two would have," Yoda chuckled and Qui-Gon nearly groaned as he got the meaning. When Emjay stared at them nonplussed Yoda raised his three-fingered hand and pointed at Ruben's midsection. The apprentice, fully aware of the goings-on reacted, triggering off a ripple of slight strokes. Emjay shot Yoda an accusing glance. Yoda was unimpressed and giggled. Ruben managed to get his control back in a matter of seconds. He really was a fighter.

"Let's leave him alone now. And next time I will choose a more appropriate place for this technique, something more... quiet. Maybe Coruscant's main port at noon." Emjay left them standing and walked into her chamber. They followed her, Yoda still giggling. Emjay fetched another chair and Yoda climbed onto it with surprising agility.

"I've indexed the most... informative places," Qui-Gon said. "I'll watch Ruben." With that he turned to leave.

"No need for that, Qui-Gon. I can easily monitor him from here," Emjay retorted.

"I'm sure you can, Emjay." The next second he was out and closed the door quietly. He didn't need to see the records a second time. He would never forget the images, nor the cries. Especially not the cries.

He sat down on the couch and began tidying the mess on the table in front of him. There was a peculiar assortment of food, drinks and data-chips. What was that? He took the object in his hands. A book. He leafed through it. Fairy-tales. Qui-Gon threw a look in Ruben's direction and smiled. That was just like Emjay. She had passed the time not only with reviewing committee reports. He found a marker near the end and started reading. First silently, then aloud. It was an unfamiliar feeling. At first his tongue tumbled slightly, unaccustomed to the task. But after a while the words came coherently and the sound of his own voice had a calming effect on him. And it shut out what he might hear from Emjay's sleeping chamber. Qui-Gon was so entranced by the reading he nearly missed the opening of the door.

Emjay stood in the doorway, a smile on her face. A smile that didn't reach her eyes. And her voice nearly cracked when she spoke. "I'll stay with Ruben now, Qui-Gon. We're through with the records. Yoda wants to talk with you in private."

He closed the book and put it down on the table. For a short moment he wondered if he would ever learn what became of Nibor and Namtab who wanted to catch the sun. "I thought you would join us."

Her friend never looked at him. "My place is here, Qui-Gon. I need to be with my Padawan." Qui-Gon remembered his own reaction to the records and understood. He squeezed her shoulder shortly and went into the other room.

"Come here, Qui-Gon." When he sat down beside his former Master the small being activated the computer. The first entry again. Qui-Gon rose and was stopped by a harsh command. "Stay you will. Watch it you will." And he obeyed, as he had always done. *Former* Master? Obviously there was no such thing.

The screen became animated. Black and white images of a small room, bare of any furniture, bare of any decoration. Only a cupboard filled with various bottles and boxes and an examination table could be seen. The door opened and the room filled with cries and screams. Although the computer's volume was set low Qui-Gon wished he could protect his ears from them. But he knew Yoda wouldn't have it. A boy, not older than maybe three or four years was carried into the room, squirming in the arms of a man, dressed in the traditional healer's garb. The man nearly lost his hold on the child who tried to scratch and bite him. The little face was stricken with fear and desperation, wet with tears. The eyes were so prominent in the pale face, standing out huge and dark, capturing the attention of the viewers. Finally the healer called out a command and a second man appeared. His assistant.

The healer handed the boy over to the other man and barked a command. While the assistant held the child the healer went over to the cupboard and prepared several syringes. Another bark and the assistant brought the boy over to the examination table, pinning him down on it with several restraints. All the time the cries never stopped and when the child saw the syringe in the healer's hand his screams became even more desperate. The assistant held the little head down and the healer administered the shot quite brutally. The boy yelped a final time and then went quiet, his breathing frantic and strained. The men waited for the injection to take effect. Minute after minute the squirming lessened. The boy now sobbed and wailed a couple of times, but never screamed again. After about five minutes he just lay there, whimpering and trembling a little.

The healer prepared a second shot and injected the kid. The child didn't even flinch. The assistant removed the restraints, picked up the limp body and left the room, with the boy in his arms.

The setting changed and another room came into view, almost as barren as the first one. There was a bed inside it and the boy sat on it. In a corner, his back pressed against the wall behind him, his knees drawn up to his chin. He just stared ahead, frozen, devoid of any movement. His eyes were still huge and dark, but he didn't cry anymore. It could have been a freeze-frame if it weren't for the counter in the upper right of the screen and the movement of the boy's eye-lids now and then.

Yoda switched off the computer and the screen went blank. Qui-Gon shook his head. "How could they do that to him?"

"Read the accompanying reports you have?"

"Of course I did."

"So?"

"So what? Hyperactivity is hardly an excuse for such a treatment."

"Help him they did, didn't they?" Yoda's voice lacked any emotions.

"What? They didn't help, they... they..." he was at a loss of words.

"Under control they got him. Solved the problem they did."

"But at what cost? Obi-Wan will probably be terrified of infirmaries for the rest of his life. They hurt him, scared him!" Qui-Gon couldn't believe Yoda's reaction. He stood and started to pace the room.

"And cured him." Qui-Gon faced his former Master and Yoda continued. "Survived he has. Feel fine now he does. Change the past you cannot. Only take care of the present you can."

"What about those methods? Do they still use them? Did you know?"

Yoda sighed. "Interfere with the Healers I cannot. I will not. Perfection hard to come by it is. Best intentions is all we have."

"But..."

"No buts, Qui-Gon. Ever wondered you did what think about us the Healers might? The Jedi, not perfect they are either. Taking children from their family, training them to kill, punishing them, pushing them to the edge and beyond, cruel that may appear, too."

"If you don't want to help Obi-Wan why did you come here in the first place?" Qui-Gon said a little louder than necessary to the other Master.

"Understand you don't. Listen you didn't. To help Obi-Wan I need not. Your problem he is now. You are mine."

"I don't understand."

To Qui-Gon's disbelief Yoda grinned. "Say that I did. The problem, lie with you it does. Still you try to save the world. Accept that limitations you have, you must."

Qui-Gon just wanted to get out of this room. But he couldn't run away. He had to face what Yoda had confronted him with. He calmed his breathing and sat down again. He freed his mind of his agitation and all the questions tormenting him. Slowly he let Yoda's words sink in.

"Good. Good. Fight too many battles and lose the war you will. Taking care of Obi-Wan is your concern." He nodded to the screen. "That boy... Obi-Wan no longer is. Futile your anger is."

The tall Jedi hid his face in his hands. "I brought him to the Healer

a few weeks ago. For the standard vaccination. He didn't like it and I thought it was pure obstinacy. He did well after all. But now... it seems to be sheer luck that he didn't go berserk. If I had only known then..."

"Discovering the truth you are. Guilt never a good advisor it is. Know about it you didn't. Not a few weeks ago, nor ten years."

"How do you know..." He interrupted himself. "You know me too well, Master. I should have known for years. Those children are strong in the Force. I should have picked up their stress."

"Shielding prominent for the Healers it is. Change their ways you cannot. As changing ours they cannot."

"And Obi-Wan?"

"His Master you are. A way you will find. The Force it will help you." Yoda laid a hand on Qui-Gon's shoulder. "Return to him now you will."

Qui-Gon nodded. He collected the chips and ejected the one still inserted in the computer, and stowed them away into one of his pockets. "Good night, Master. And thank you for dressing me down," he said, subdued.

"Good night, Padawan." Qui-Gon felt Yoda's eyes on his back. Yes, a part of him would ever be Yoda's Padawan. And he was sure it wasn't the worst part of him.

Outside in the lounge he found Emjay, reading out loud for her apprentice. She stopped when he entered. "Thank you, Emjay." She smiled, and he felt that she had regained her control, too. "By the way, did they catch the sun?"

"No, they died in the attempt. But they left their mark on their home-world. Nibor and Namtab are regarded as heroes by their people."

"I must borrow this book sometime. I think Obi-Wan would like the tale."

"I'm sure he will, Qui-Gon. Good night." With a final nod to Emjay he left his friend's quarters. It would be perfect if Obi-Wan chose her as his Guardian. Well, maybe not perfect, but most certainly the next best thing.

ooo00ooo

On his way home Qui-Gon considered the pros and cons of telling Obi-Wan what had happened in his early childhood. The Jedi Master was sure that his apprentice's fear of Healers, infirmaries, and such sprang from those dreadful experiences. Even though he couldn't remember it, the Healers had all but abused him. Qui-Gon had just seen a small boy - more of an infant, actually - who panicked whenever someone in Healer clothes came in sight, and who practically screamed in agony when a hypo was even in the same room with him. On the few datachips in Qui-Gon's possession thirteen different incidents underlined this fact.

Qui-Gon's chest tightened and his stomach cramped when he thought about the possibility that there was another child treated like this right now. Treated without compassion, hurt without a word of comfort, and - at least in Obi-Wan's case - never a creche Master at his side who tried to give mental support via the Force. True, a child this age probably couldn't comprehend why it was pained, but a few calming words and a reassuring hand holding small and cold fingers wouldn't have hurt, would they? But Yoda was right; confronted with this accusation all the Healers would say was that a child this age also couldn't comprehend why it was ripped out of its cradle and the loved familiarity known as parents and home.

Sighing, the Jedi Master realized that all this wouldn't help him in making his decision whether to make Obi-Wan understand why he felt that subconscious angst or not. He silently entered his quarters to avoid waking his Padawan who was, thank the Force, still fast asleep. Qui-Gon immediately decided against waking him now to inform him just to ease his own aching heart. Tomorrow was definitely early enough, if at all. And even if I am going to tell him, Qui-Gon thought, there's no way he's going to see these records. Qui-Gon thought about checking on Obi-Wan but didn't want to risk waking him so he just gathered the Force once more and ascertained that his apprentice slept deep and dreamless for the moment. Satisfied, he took off his boots and cloak and settled down in his usual kneeling posture on the mat for a calming meditation, but after an hour of vain attempts to meditate, his mind still wasn't any more peaceful and the Jedi Master fancied, brushing his teeth, that this was going to be a long, restless night. He had been mistaken; he was asleep as soon as his head had touched his pillow.

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When Qui-Gon knocked firmly on his apprentice's door the next morning before taking a shower, he welcomed the feeling that everything was back to normal. The feeling intensified when a drowsy Obi-Wan appeared from his room, murmured something unintelligible, which Qui-Gon always had optimistically identified as some sort of a morning greeting, and helped his Master preparing breakfast. As usual, the pair succeeded in keeping absolute silence until after breakfast.

"Obi-Wan, I wish you to work on the role kata I acquainted you with the day before yesterday alone this afternoon. On both the light and the shadow part."

His Padawan looked a little disappointed but tried to hide it. "Yes, Master. Will we have lunch together?" He was sorting through his datapads in his quest to connect the correct datapads with the classes they belonged to.

"I'm afraid not. Chancellor Ko'al bade Master Windu and me to witness the opening ceremony of this new Riding the Waves of Culture museum on Coruscant's second moon. But I trust this will be over in the late afternoon so our dinner with Master Mon-Ahan and Ruben is in no danger of being postponed again." Ready to leave for his first class, Obi-Wan looked at his Master a little uncertainly and Qui-Gon saw the unspoken question in his student's eyes. "Don't worry, Padawan. We'll have all the time we need to get this done," Qui-Gon tried to encourage him but his voice didn't have nearly the gentle tone he had

intended to use. Accordingly, Obi-Wan didn't look in the least convinced, but bowed his respects and left. Great, Qui-Gon scolded himself, I should found a new class myself. Titled: How to effectively put off an important decision or conversation.

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Almost time to go. Qui-Gon checked his appearance in the mirror again, looking for stains and tears in his tunic that miraculously materialized every time shortly before he had to attend important social occasions. No, not this time. With a sigh of relief he put on his cloak. Mace Windu hated waiting and had already called twice to make sure he would be on time.

Just the moment he wanted to leave his comm-link beeped. He shouldn't be surprised. He had already been spared changing his tunic. The infamous last-minute-call had been obligatory and unavoidable.

"Jinn," he snarled into the device. Yes, that definitely was the right tone. That should discourage the caller enough.

"I just love your voice when you're angry, dear." Qui-Gon buried his hopes of ending this soon. Emjay would be unimpressed by any of his tactics. "What is it? Your usual morning blues? Just to let you know, it's already almost noon."

Qui-Gon bit back the chuckle that threatened to escape his throat. "Mace is expecting me at the shuttle hangar. We are to attend ---"

"--- that culture thing?" Her laughter came over the connection rather loudly. "How did that old fox get you into this? He asked me two weeks ago to accompany him and I plainly refused. I had already wondered why he let me off the hook so easily."

"Mace didn't ask me. It was a request by the Chancellor himself."

"And who do you think told the Chancellor to ask you in the first place?" Another fit of laughter shook his friend. "Sorry, Qui-Gon, I didn't mean to ---"

He cut her short. "Of course you did, Emjay. I have to leave now."

"So who's hindering you? As far as I know talking and walking don't use the same parts of the anatomy. That's valid as far as our species is concerned. Although I recall meeting a Pendalar and they actually walk on their mouths. Looked rather peculiar. So if you ever need a silent hiking companion ---"

Again he interrupted her, following her advice and already making his way to the elevators. "Emjay, please, why did you call?"

"Ah, yes, my Padawan needs to know when you'll be here for dinner. He's going on and on about the perfect timing for something he calls a 'Rising Moon'. Whatever that might be."

"It's a soufflé."

"Whatever. So, when can you get here?"

"Not before six."

He heard Emjay calling out to her apprentice. "Ruben says, he needs the exact time."

"Tell him seven will be fine for us." Again Emjay transferred that vital information to Ruben. Qui-Gon entered the elevator and punched in the destination.

"Okay, seven it is. See you tonight, Qui-Gon. And greetings to your lovely wife. Oh sorry, wrong holo-novel. Greetings to Obi-Wan."

"I won't see him before this afternoon, Emjay. And wait a second. How's Ruben?"

"He came out of the 'dead man' technique alive and kicking this morning. Now, that sounds strange. By the way, the next time you leave Yoda in my quarters tell me how to get rid of him efficiently. Somehow he ended up in my kitchen and stuffing food into himself, muttering that he'd had missed the reception's dinner because of you and he needed what he called a tiny snack. A tiny snack indeed, half my kitchen is pillaged. How can such a little being devour such quantities of food?"

"Emjay, I'm at the hangar now, sorry. We can talk tonight."

"Give Mace my compliments. Have fun." The connection was terminated. Qui-Gon stepped out of the car and he checked the time. Well, he needn't have worried. Two minutes before the appointed hour. Nonetheless, Mace was already waiting for him.

"Greetings, Qui-Gon. You are on time." Qui-Gon grimaced slightly. Why did he have to sound so surprised?

"Mace." He nodded to the fellow Master. The two men entered the waiting shuttle. Qui-Gon sat back in his seat, closing his eyes. He smiled, remembering his peculiar conversation with Emjay. Remarkable how well he fared with her, especially compared with the rather icy relationship between him and Mace Windu. He could respect the man for his skills and his achievements. But apart from that... He tried to imagine Mace talking about Yoda the way Emjay did. Impossible.

Qui-Gon grinned. What had she said about his former Master? How can such a little being devour such quantities of food? Not three weeks ago he had thought almost the same...

Qui-Gon had just settled himself down on the meditation mat in the living area of his quarters when Obi-Wan burst into the room like he was running for cover from an infuriated Mace Windu. He stopped dead when he realized his Master was meditating. He bowed suggestively and greeted his Master. "Good afternoon, Master. I'm sorry for disturbing you." Qui-Gon nodded shortly and raised a questioning eyebrow at his

apprentice. If he wasn't completely mistaken, Obi-Wan's 'I'm sorry for disturbing you' had had a slight edge to it.

"Good afternoon, Padawan. If I recall correctly you had planned to spend some time with some of your friends?"

Obi-Wan headed for the kitchen while he answered. "Yes, but I'd forgotten that they were going to the fair in the upper Jirtu quarter." He poured himself a glass of juice. "Do you mind if I go to my room now? I'd like to study for the temporal mechanics exam next week instead." Obi-Wan obviously tried to sound nonchalant but Qui-Gon didn't miss his apprentice's strained tone. He was already on his way to his room when Qui-Gon's words stopped him.

"Obi-Wan, why didn't you ask for permission to go with them? Since you would have been in the company of other Padawans I probably would have let you go."

Obi-Wan made a sound that might have been a snort suppressed at the last moment. "You know, Master, it's sort of no fun going to a fair without so much as one credit." And this time his words definitely had an edge to them. His Padawan turned and walked into his room without waiting for an answer from his Master. Qui-Gon considered for a moment going after him and giving him a lecture about proper behavior towards his Master but decided against it after a few moments. He could feel his Padawans mental uproar and reminded himself that he had provoked such an outburst by not giving him any allowance. He sighed inwardly and concentrated on his meditations again.

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Two hours later Qui-Gon finally decided to talk to his apprentice about this particular matter. Obi-Wan hadn't come out of his room since the incident. Qui-Gon rose from the mat and knocked on his Padawan's door. At first, there was no answer to his knocking and Qui-Gon wondered if his Padawan might have fallen asleep over his studies. He was about to reach out with the Force to check when he heard Obi-Wan's: "Yes?" The Jedi Master opened the door and took in the sight of his Padawan, lying on his bed on his stomach, surrounded by books and datapads. The tendency of young people to learn, read and write on their beds was still a mystery to him. What did they think a desk was made for?

"May I come in, Padawan? I'd like to talk to you about something." Qui-Gon kept his voice deliberately neutral.

"Of course, Master." The edge was gone from his voice but he still sounded a little unsure. Was he afraid his Master would punish him for his inappropriate behavior earlier? In the meantime Obi-Wan brought himself to a sitting position and moved some of the stuff on his bed to make room for his Master to sit down. Again Qui-Gon asked himself if youths knew what one could use a chair for except putting clothes over it. Nevertheless he seated himself next to Obi-Wan on his bed.

"Obi-Wan, about our discussion earlier..." he started but his apprentice interrupted him.

"I know, Master. My behavior was uncalled for. I'm sorry. It will

never happen again. It's not my place to ---" He was stopped by Qui-Gon's upraised hand.

"That's not what I wanted to talk to you about, Padawan. Besides, we talked about your temper before, didn't we?" he continued after Obi-Wan's humble nod. "Would you have liked to go to that fair?" Another nod. "Then why didn't you ask for credits and permission to join your fellow Padawans?"

"I thought you wouldn't give me money for a fair anyway." Obi-Wan held his eyes down, avoiding the intense stare of his Master.

"What made you think that?"

Obi-Wan's temper kicked in a bit again and his voice was a little louder than strictly necessary. "You said so yourself! You said I would only get allowance for things I need." In spite of his tone Obi-Wan still didn't dare to look up.

"Padawan!" Qui-Gon replied in a warning tone. A second later he continued in a normal voice: "But even a Jedi needs some recreation from time to time, Obi-Wan. You should have asked." Qui-Gon exhaled audibly and got up from the bed. "I thought about having dinner out today, Padawan. Would you care to join me?"

Qui-Gon had to suppress a smile when Obi-Wan's head shot up and his eyes widened in surprise and disbelief. "You mean that?" But Obi-Wan answered his question himself. "Yes, I would like that very much, Master."

"Very well then. Shower, put on a fresh tunic and then we're ready to go." Without waiting for an answer from his apprentice, the Jedi Master turned and left the room with long, swift strides.

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Half an hour later the pair left their quarters to wait for an airbus on one of the platforms surrounding the Jedi Temple. Obi-Wan walked on his Master's left side, always one pace behind as befitted an apprentice. On their way to the platform they met a couple of other Jedi, among them Master Emjay Mon-Ahan and her Padawan Ruben Gãtzt. They saw them coming from a way off and they finally met in the middle of a long corridor leading to the gates.

"Qui-Gon! Tell me what I wanna hear! My impertinent Padawan needs a lesson." Emjay called. She swiftly grabbed a handful of sugar-covered-almonds from a cone said Padawan was holding in his hand. He tried to pull the cone away but wasn't fast enough.

"Hey!" Ruben exclaimed. "These are my almonds! Get your own!" Though he was only sixteen, he already towered over Emjay, a relatively small woman.

"Okay!" Emjay replied, munching on the almonds. "I won't eat anymore of your almonds and yesterday was the last time you used my Uhiray bathing-oil."

"That's not fair!" Ruben protested but wasn't quite able to keep the smirk from his face.

Before Master Mon-Ahan had a chance to retort something like: 'Life's seldom fair' Qui-Gon interrupted their dispute. "What would you like to hear, Emjay?" The male Jedi Master was smiling, too. Emjay and Ruben were having another one of their verbal confrontations.

Master Mon-Ahan was chewing on some more almonds and so Ruben answered Qui-Gon's question in her place. "When we saw you heading for the gate to the airbus, my Master and I made a little bet as to whether you were going to the fair or not." Ruben ate some of his almonds before they were out.

"So give," Emjay added, running another attack at Ruben's cone.

Qui-Gon feigned a desperate sigh. These two were absolutely fabulous. Trust Emjay Mon-Ahan to bring some humor into the most boring of situations. And her Padawan wasn't exactly slowing her down. "We are going to have dinner. In the Terminol-section, I thought. Does that satisfy ---" 'your curiosity, Emjay' he had wanted to say but was interrupted by Master Mon-Ahan's cursing and a triumphant laugh from Ruben.

"Thank you, Master Jinn! You just rescued me from two weeks of laundry-duty." Ruben and Emjay slowly resumed their steps along the corridor and so did Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon. Still, they could follow Emjay's and Ruben's discussion for a while longer.

"Only over my dead body, Ruben. No chance I will do the laundry alone for two weeks!"

"The wager was your idea, Master, and I believe just a minute ago you were about to make a remark as to the fairness of life?"

"I really should discipline you more often, Ruben."

"Whatever you say, Master. Would you like another almond?" Ruben's remark was followed by a slapping sound. Probably Emjay's hand on his posterior.

Despite himself, Qui-Gon just had to laugh softly. Those two were absolutely hopeless. When they had reached the platform Obi-Wan could no longer hold onto his curiosity. "Those two are Master and Padawan?"

Qui-Gon looked down at his young apprentice while they were waiting for the bus to arrive. "Yes, they are. A quite successful pair, I might add."

The youth's eyes expressed pure disbelief. "But... But the way he talks to Master Mon-Ahan!"

"I know what it looks like, Padawan. But believe me when I say he has the utmost respect for her. It's just her way of training and educating him. Remember what I told you, Obi-Wan. No two Master-Padawan bonds are alike."

"Yes, Master," Obi-Wan answered and a minute later the bus arrived to take them to the Terminol-section.

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Qui-Gon had picked a nice little restaurant on the top of one of the higher buildings in the Terminol-section. He had been here before and though the waiters didn't know him he was recognized as Jedi and they were given a table in a quiet corner of the restaurant with a spectacular view over the skyline. Qui-Gon smiled to himself. Sometimes being a Jedi definitely had its advantages. The Jedi Master knew that many Jedi came here to eat on a regular basis.

Obi-Wan was looking around curiously, taking in as much as he could. The Jedi Master knew from first hand experience that the Initiates had only very rare opportunities to leave the Temple, and so the young Padawans couldn't wait to get out of it. And this was the first time Qui-Gon had left the Temple together with his new apprentice and thus a very special occasion not only for him but especially for the boy. Obi-Wan was broadcasting his excitement quite strongly but Qui-Gon decided against reprimanding him for it. The excitement would lessen automatically when he got out of the Temple more often.

A waitress brought the menu cards and asked if they had already decided on something to drink. Qui-Gon answered in the negative. She smiled and left.

"What should I drink, Master?" Obi-Wan looked over the huge variety of available beverages, he had undoubtedly never heard of three quarters of them and actually tasted even less.

"As long as there is no alcohol in it, Padawan, you can drink whatever you like. Same goes for your choice of food." Obi-Wan didn't look one bit happier than before his question. Qui-Gon chuckled softly. This really must be quite the experience for his young apprentice. Obi-Wan asked him a couple of times what something was and the Jedi Master answered to the best of his knowledge. Finally Qui-Gon gestured the waitress that they were ready to place their orders. She congratulated them on their choices and disappeared towards the kitchen.

Obi-Wan was awfully quiet, Qui-Gon noticed. "Something wrong, Padawan?"

"No, Master, not at all. On the contrary. I'm really enjoying this." And after a moment, he added: "Thanks for taking me." The Master could see that he meant it.

"We will have a lot of opportunities to dine together in the future, my young Padawan. You can be certain of that." Obi-Wan only nodded in response and then continued to stare out the window or watch the waiters and waitresses bustling around in the restaurant.

Qui-Gon would have liked a conversation but for the moment he couldn't think of one thing to say to his apprentice and so he stayed silent. Shortly after their dinner had arrived the Jedi Master could suddenly feel a very familiar Force matrix and he smiled.

"What is it, Master?" his apprentice wanted to know, showing he hadn't missed his teacher's smile.

"Master Yoda is here, Obi-Wan."

"What? Where?" The young Padawan immediately straightened up and looked nervously - almost fearfully - around. Qui-Gon laughed softly.

"Not here in this room, Obi-Wan. But he is close by," he informed his student.

Obi-Wan shook his head slightly. "How do you know?"

"I told you about the special bond between Master and Padawan, right?" At Obi-Wan's nod he continued, "Well, Yoda is my former Master. Our bond's still quite strong so - for example - I can sense when he's around."

"So he knows that we're here as well?"

Qui-Gon thought about that for a moment. "He knows for sure that I am here. As to you, he will suspect it, but I don't think he knows your matrix so well yet." Qui-Gon was glad to answer Obi-Wan's questions. He very much appreciated his eagerness for knowledge. He intended to do everything to encourage this.

"Did he sense you earlier than you did him, Master?" Between his questions Obi-Wan managed somehow to eat his dinner.

"Not much earlier, no."

"But he has the highest midi-chlorian count of all Jedi."

"That doesn't necessarily mean that he's in every way superior to all the other Jedi. For example, picking up a familiar Force matrix is very much about feeling the living Force around you. And in this special art Master Yoda and I are almost equally skilled."

Obi-Wan nodded and thought about that for a moment, which gave Qui-Gon the chance to eat some bites before his apprentice's questioning continued. "Did Master Yoda want you to know that he is here?"

The Jedi Master swallowed and took a sip of the light wine he had ordered for himself. "If he hadn't wanted anyone to feel his presence, he would have shielded himself. As would I if I had wanted not to be recognized."

"Can you tell exactly where he is?"

"No," Qui-Gon laughed softly again. "Only that he's near by. Probably even in this building."

"And can you tell what he's doing?"

Qui-Gon shook his head again. "No, only what he's feeling; and that only as long as he wants me to know."

Obi-Wan had almost finished his dinner by now. "And may I ask what he's feeling right now?"

"You may ask anything, Obi-Wan, like I told you before. To answer your question: I could reach out with the Force now, mentally touch Yoda and find out what he's feeling. But this would be a violation of

his privacy. It's against the Code to do so without a very good reason." Qui-Gon, too, was finished with his dinner now. "But there are occasions where a Jedi involuntarily sends his feelings through the bond. For instance: Imagine I'm very sad about something and fail to raise my shields accordingly. Then Master Yoda would pick up on my distress and probably contact me immediately, wanting to know what's wrong." He smiled at this thought.

"And vice-versa?"

Qui-Gon chuckled again. "Theoretically, yes. But Master Yoda's shields are usually always appropriately raised. He only sends emotions and thoughts if he wants to."

"Thoughts? You mean, you and Master Yoda can actually communicate via your bond?"

"Yes and no. Yoda and I both can send and receive any kind of emotion. Reassurance, sympathy, humor. Things like that. But you can't think of it as a real conversation. We are also able to send pictures, but those are usually very vague and blurry. For example, I could contact Master Yoda now and ask him if he would like to join us. It's just that I wouldn't actually ask him. This is really hard to explain, Obi-Wan. You will understand all this better when our bond has strengthened." He paused when the waitress came again to gather their plates and brought them the dessert cards instead.

Obi-Wan lifted a questioning eyebrow, a gesture he had already picked up from his Master. As Master, as Padawan, Qui-Gon thought in amusement. "If you would like a dessert, Obi-Wan, feel free to choose whatever you like." And after a moment. "Do you want me to?"

"Master?"

"Contact Yoda." Obi-Wan instantly went pale again and the Master added quickly, "He won't bite you, Obi-Wan. He's just another Jedi who happens to have been my Master."

"Who happens to be the head of the Council, also," his Padawan exclaimed and Qui-Gon once more had to laugh about his apprentice's words. And then Obi-Wan surprised him. "You would like him to be here, wouldn't you?"

Qui-Gon nodded. "Yes, Obi-Wan, I would."

"Do you promise not to discuss my training while we're here?"

This made the older Jedi laugh heartily. He nodded and then reached out to his former Master who seemed to have only been waiting for an invitation. He sent confirmation toward his former student. "He's on his way. He'd waited for that since he first sensed my presence."

The boy nodded, very serious all of a sudden. "Do you like to have Master Yoda around?" he wanted to know.

"Sometimes more, sometimes less, to tell the truth, Padawan. Master Yoda and I had some tough times together in which we apparently

couldn't agree on one single thing."

"I hope this won't be the case with us, Master. And I hope our bond will become as strong as the one you have with Master Yoda."

"So do I, Padawan, so do I." He wanted to add something but Yoda chose this moment to enter the restaurant and he decided to delay this particular serious discussion. Instead he gathered a third chair from the table next to theirs. Obi-Wan moved to get up but Qui-Gon gestured to him to stay seated. They were not in the Council chamber, after all. And not even in the Temple, for that matter.

"Good evening, my Master," Qui-Gon greeted the small Jedi.

"Good evening, Master Yoda," Obi-Wan added quickly which earned him a 'just relax' look from Qui-Gon.

"Good evening," snorted the green being now. "What good should there be on an evening where a poor old Jedi Master has to wait nearly an eternity until he's invited to dinner table of his former Padawan?" Yoda settled down on the additional chair Qui-Gon had provided and without a word of gratitude took the dessert card Qui-Gon offered him smiling.

"Obi-Wan and I were in the middle of an important discussion when I first noticed your presence, Master. Besides, you could have come up without an invitation."

The only response to his words was a snorted grunt from behind the dessert card which Yoda was checking out thoroughly. Qui-Gon felt a wave of distress from his Padawan. He didn't think Obi-Wan had sent it deliberately for he hadn't yet tried sending emotions through their bond. Nevertheless, Qui-Gon sent a wave of calmness and reassurance back. There was no need for Obi-Wan to be nervous.

Then, finally, the old Jedi Master laid his dessert card aside. "Chosen, have you?" he asked Qui-Gon.

"I won't have a dessert, my Master. Only some tea." After another disparaging snort, Yoda turned to Obi-Wan and asked him the same question.

"I haven't made up my mind yet, Master Yoda. I don't know most of the desserts offered." Despite his nervousness Obi-Wan's voice was firm and steady.

"Choose for you, then let me, young Kenobi," Yoda replied and gestured to the waitress.

Qui-Gon winced slightly when Yoda ordered a double portion of hot chocolate pudding with fruits for his apprentice and a huge variety of different ice-cream flavors for himself. Don't argue with your former Master when your apprentice is present, Qui-Gon reminded himself. Obi-Wan wouldn't be able to eat all this, anyway. Yoda leaned back in his chair, studying his former student. "Decided, have you, which categories you will compete in at this year's Bhavani?" Qui-Gon suppressed a sigh. Had he really have had any doubts Yoda would bring this topic up?

"Actually, I was planning not to compete at all. There's the high possibility that I won't be on the planet during the Bhavani, after all." It was a lame excuse and Qui-Gon knew it as soon as it had left his mouth. And so did Yoda.

"Worry about that, I would not, my Padawan. Make sure you'll be here, I will. Deny your new Padawan the chance to see you in the Bhavani-competitions you cannot."

Before Qui-Gon could answer, the waitress returned with their desserts. Qui-Gon wondered for the thousandth time how many stomachs this little green being next to him had. With amusement Qui-Gon observed how Obi-Wan's eyes went wide at the sight of the huge bowl filled with steaming chocolate pudding, sweet fruits swimming around in it.

"Subscribed you already to the single kata competition I have. Running a very high bet that defend your title you will, I am," Yoda remarked lightly after he had eliminated two of the ice-cream balls. Qui-Gon choked on his tea, covering his mouth with the back of his right hand. His former Master simply must have been kidding!

Obviously undisturbed by Qui-Gon's reaction, Yoda reached for the boy's bowl. "Trade, we will. A long time it has been since I tasted this specialty." The human Master only shrugged when Obi-Wan shot him a look. There was no way to oppose Yoda's wishes. A lesson he had learned long ago. Nonetheless, he was determined not to let Yoda's plans for the Bhavani, or to be more precise, his own role in them, go uncommented on.

"You subscribed me to the single katas?" Qui-Gon said, a little irritated. "If I recall correctly it needs my signature to do that."

"Your Master I am, Qui-Gon. So subscribe you I can." While Yoda fished in the pudding for the best fruits, Obi-Wan silently enjoyed the ice-cream as well as the exchange between the two Jedi Masters.

"You're my former Master, Master. May I remind you that I can make decisions on my own since I'm Knighted?"

"Rubbish! Start you will. Like to see you in one-on-one battle as well, I would." Yoda changed the bowls again, digging into the ice-cream, but Obi-Wan for once seemed sated and put his spoon aside. Qui-Gon suddenly noticed the dark rings under his student's eyes. It was time to get home but on the other hand Qui-Gon had no intention of letting his Master get away with this. Not this time, anyway.

"All right," he conceded. "Fifty-fifty."

That got Yoda's attention. "What?"

"If I win the single katas, which I seriously doubt, fifty per cent of your win is mine. That's only fair." His tone brooked no argument. If his Master could use filthy paths, so could he.

"Blackmailing illegal it is on Coruscant, Padawan." Yoda stated

sternly, but Qui-Gon wasn't impressed by it. Not after being his apprentice for over ten years.

"And so is faking a signature," he countered dryly, sipping on his tea, knowing that this was one of the very rare occasions where he had won an argument with his Master. Former Master, he corrected himself.

Yoda only snorted very disparagingly and Qui-Gon had a hard time keeping his amusement in check. Yoda hated admitting defeat. Eight hundred years old or not. The spirit had cooled down considerably after that and Qui-Gon had paid the check not five minutes after the ancient Master had managed not only to finish his ice-cream but Obi-Wan's dessert as well.

Naturally, he also had to pay for their ride back to the Temple. During the ride Qui-Gon wondered if he would have to carry his apprentice back to their quarters, for the young man barely managed to keep his eyes open. All these new experiences had tired him out more than his Padawan would admit. Obi-Wan hadn't said one word since Yoda's question about his choice for dessert and Qui-Gon was beginning to believe that it might have been a mistake to invite the old Master. He certainly preferred the highly spirited and inquisitive Obi-Wan over the subdued one he had become after Yoda's arrival. The tall Master wasn't sure, though, if his former Master had noticed the effect his appearance had had on the young Jedi.

The shuttle pilot landed the little craft turbulently on Silver Water, Coruscant's second moon, and Qui-Gon was roughly pulled out of his memories. He was thankful that Mace hadn't disturbed him on the short trip, being deep in his own thoughts as it seemed. As they stood, the two tall men looked at each other, preparing themselves for a boring day at yet another opening. Being Jedi didn't only consist of saving the Galaxy and rescuing the young beautiful princess from the evil dragon.

"Mace, you owe me for this one." Qui-Gon leaned towards the dark man, keeping his voice low.

The Council member raised his eyebrows. "I owe you?" His forehead wrinkled into a frown. "If you think any of this is my doing you are mistaken, Qui-Gon."

"Spare me this; I talked to Emjay."

"Oh."

"Yes, oh." Qui-Gon paused to greet the dignitaries that came up the ramp to accompany them to the museum. Quite impressive, a full version Guard of Honor. Well, every rumor about the museum being the prestige object of the Senate seemed to be true.

As the two Jedi followed the Guard Mace whispered to Qui-Gon. "You have to understand, Qui-Gon. This is important for the Council."

"For the Council or for you, Mace?" The look he got from his fellow

Master clearly informed him that there was hardly a difference. "You could have asked me."

"And you would have agreed to come?" Windu asked, disbelieving.

"No." Qui-Gon had a hard time suppressing his amusement at the other man's frown. "Well, I might have." No need to anger the man. The day ahead would be hard enough as it was. "Still, you owe me." With that the two Jedi Masters entered the vast halls of the newly erected building, filled with diplomats of all known cultures that constituted the Republic. Qui-Gon scolded himself for his derogatory attitude. After all, the museum had been planned as a symbol of the Republic's unity. The thought alone deserved a little well-meaning from his side. Maybe he would even enjoy it; one could hope.

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In the end they barely made it back to the Temple before seven. They wouldn't have, Qui-Gon knew, if Mace hadn't had an appointment of his own at seven. Qui-Gon rushed to his quarters and when he entered, he found himself short one Padawan and plus one nervous wreck. Obi-Wan was practically running towards him when he let himself in.

"Master! At last!"

Qui-Gon did the first thing that occurred to him at the sight of his nearly hysterical apprentice: He knelt and cupped the agitated boy's cheeks in both hands. "I'm here now, Padawan. Don't concern yourself any longer. It doesn't matter if we are ten minutes late for dinner."

"Thought something had happened. And Master Mon-Ahan has called twice and I didn't know what to tell her... And your comm-link was deactivated and so..." he trailed off, freeing himself from Qui-Gon's soft grip, and instead moved forward to embrace his Master in a surprisingly firm hug.

Qui-Gon cursed himself. He had deactivated his comm-link during the reception and forgotten to put it back on during their flight back. "Yes, but everything is okay now, Obi-Wan. Calm down." He gently patted the youth's back for a few moments before reaching into his tunic, producing a datapad, and gently pushing his apprentice away. "Obi-Wan, I have an errand for you to run. I need you to go to Healer Asdo'r's protÃ©gÃ© or assistant or to whomever you'll meet there and deliver this message. He or she will give you the necessary equipment for our vaccinations in return. Can you do this?"

Obi-Wan wiped away some tears and nodded firmly. "Yes, Master. Do you get to get one, too?"

"Yes, so our cycles will be adjusted. Makes it easier to keep track on 'em. And now go. We'll meet in Master Mon-Ahan's quarters. I'll go there as soon as I have used the bathroom and put on a more comfortable tunic."

The young apprentice nodded once more and was out the door.

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Emjay greeted him with a bright smile and immediately relieved him of the bottle of Nuridat he had brought. "Hi Qui, you're late. Ruben says, Nuridat doesn't go too well with Rising Moon but it will do. Where's this charge of yours?"

"Hello Emjay, I'm sorry, I'm glad it'll do, and at the Healer's, getting those hypos."

His friend nodded. "Have you told him?"

"No, I couldn't. And I'm not sure I should. At least not yet," he answered a little sadly.

"I'm convinced that you'll make the right decision. You're his Master, you'll know when and if at all the time is right." With that the subject was closed for the evening.

Considerate, Emjay and Ruben hadn't laid the table yet and so Obi-Wan could place everything he had brought on the dining table when he returned ten minutes later. Qui-Gon noticed that his hands were a little shaky. Prior to Obi-Wan's arrival, Qui-Gon had told Emjay how he had planned this to happen and so his friend knew what she had to do. Having restricted Ruben to 'his' kitchen as Emjay had put it, both Masters intended to get this over with as soon as possible.

Feeling a little uneasy himself, Qui-Gon wordlessly lay down on the couch, and bared the upper half of his posterior. He hoped that it would encourage and reassure Obi-Wan when he saw how his Master had to tolerate the same inconvenience he would have.

Emjay's Master had had a medical education and so her hands were well skilled in this. Also keeping her silence, she knelt down before the sofa, preparing her task. Out of the corner of his eye, Qui-Gon saw his apprentice as he watched the procedure from a healthy distance. He looked ready to flee from the room. Emjay had noticed it, too. "Obi-Wan? Step closer, please. You need to learn how this is done in case Qui-Gon gets injured on a mission or something." Her tone was matter-of-fact, giving away nothing of her feelings. At first, Obi-Wan came closer reluctantly but then seemed to get a grip on himself and knelt down next to the female Master, determined to watch and learn.

Qui-Gon felt the coolness of the disinfectant Emjay was using and a few seconds later how she - professionally and rather unceremoniously - entered his gluteal muscle, on the sting's heels the unpleasant burning and tearing pain as she emptied the hypo's cylinder. Force, but it hurt. Even Qui-Gon had to clench his teeth in order to keep still and quiet. The Jedi Master figured that starting to groan in pain wouldn't exactly help Obi-Wan.

It was over soon enough and the procedure repeated on his other buttock with the second injection. He couldn't suppress a sound of relief when Emjay was finally finished and he could get up from this humiliating position. While fastening his pants, he caught a look from Obi-Wan; half sympathetic and half afraid of what was to come. Obi-Wan had received the first vaccination on his second day as

Qui-Gon's apprentice and now had to get the two counter injections in order to complete the inoculation. On that first occasion Obi-Wan's behavior had been more than acceptable but Qui-Gon was sure that this had been caused by Obi-Wan's first acknowledgment of their newly established bond. Having in mind the scenes of the records he had watched the previous evening, Qui-Gon feared that it might be much worse tonight because there wouldn't be anything to distract Obi-Wan this time.

"I'll be in the kitchen, helping Ruben with dinner," Emjay excused herself and Qui-Gon thought that she would be lucky if Ruben didn't kick her out of the kitchen after thirty seconds, but he refrained from making the according remark.

A heaved breath from his apprentice caught his attention and Qui-Gon was even more relieved than glad that he couldn't only see fear but also trust in Obi-Wan's eyes. Bravely, the young Jedi rose from his kneeling pose and started to lie down on the couch, following his Master's example, but Qui-Gon stopped him. "No, Obi-Wan. You don't need to lie down; you may stay standing if you like." Qui-Gon was determined to avoid anything that might trigger off those deeply buried memories torturing his apprentice. Towering over him while he administered the injections wasn't a situation he wanted Obi-Wan to be confronted with.

His Padawan looked a little doubtfully at him and Qui-Gon cautiously sat down at the dining table, beginning to prepare the two shots Obi-Wan would receive. Qui-Gon gave his apprentice a smile and bade him to come over with a small movement of his head. Obi-Wan complied hesitantly but came to stand next to his sitting Master, watching how he finished his preparations. Qui-Gon reached up and quickly squeezed a trembling shoulder. "Let's get this over with, shall we?" Obi-Wan nodded once and lowered his pants unasked, knowing what his Master expected of him. "Bend over the table a little and rest some of your weight on your arms so you can relax the muscles in your backside," the Jedi Master ordered gently. The apprentice inhaled very deeply and, again, did as his Master had told him.

Qui-Gon applied the disinfectant, ignoring Obi-Wan's slight wince. "Please enumerate the prime numbers for me, Obi-Wan. Start with the lowest and work your way up." The older Jedi hoped that this would not only distract Obi-Wan, but also calm him a little.

"One, two, three, five, seven, eleven, thirteen, seventeen, nineteen, twenty-three," his Padawan obediently started to count and Qui-Gon placed his left thumb next to the spot where he wanted to break the skin, gently pressing it harder into the flesh for half a second, then releasing it and repeating the action a couple of times until he felt the tensed muscle relax slightly. Obi-Wan jumped a little when Qui-Gon drove the needle in and shut his mouth abruptly.

"Keep counting, Obi-Wan." This time his apprentice needed a second or two before he obeyed and Qui-Gon first began to push the cylinder down ever so slowly, when Obi-Wan had reached thirty-seven and had relaxed his tensed muscles again. His voice got more and more strained as the pain in his backside increased and his counting slowed accordingly, but he managed to keep still and had reached sixty-one by the time Qui-Gon was finished with the first shot. The Jedi Master's amazement at how his Padawan had endured the first shot from Healer Asdo'r so well grew with every passing second. Fortune

favours fools, Qui-Gon thought; it had been sheer luck that Obi-Wan hadn't hit the ceiling right there and then.

The Padawan had taken a step back and a few deep, calming breaths and now resumed his former position, facing the second demon that was waiting for him. Obi-Wan certainly had pluck, all right. "Obi-Wan?" Qui-Gon said softly, "please come and stand on my other side." He took a long look at Obi-Wan's face when the youth quickly changed sides and Qui-Gon didn't like how pale his apprentice was; all the blood had drained from his face. He surely was on the edge. The Jedi Master clenched his jaw and took the second hypo. The sooner they got this over with the better for Obi-Wan. "Start counting again, Obi-Wan," he said.

"No, please!" his apprentice exclaimed pleadingly, but it was the panic in Obi-Wan's voice that made Qui-Gon reach up instantly to stroke the youth's head.

"Shh. It's okay. We're almost done. You don't have to count if you don't want to. Just try to keep still, then."

Obi-Wan whispered a relieved "thanks," and fixed his eyes on his own hands again, which left perspiration marks on Emjay's dining table.

Qui-Gon carefully repeated his thumb procedure and could only describe the sound Obi-Wan gave when he pricked him for the second time as a squeak. "Shh. Almost over," the Jedi Master soothed again, but he didn't think Obi-Wan was acknowledging the words, let alone reacting to them. He kept his gaze stoically on his apprentice's face while he cautiously pressed the liquid inside him, and Obi-Wan's silent weeping made it all the harder for the Jedi Master. Qui-Gon thought that he was probably almost as relieved and glad as his Padawan was when he finally pulled the needle out.

He pushed the injection-kit aside and sat down on the table, ignoring his own throbbing backside, and pulled his exhausted apprentice into his arms. Qui-Gon thought that Obi-Wan would cry for a few minutes but the boy surprised him yet again when he pushed back after only a few seconds, a forced smile on his lips. "It's okay, Master, really," the young Jedi said and Qui-Gon used the Force to verify the statement. When Obi-Wan used a lapet of his tunic to dry his face from the tears, Qui-Gon realized with a compassionate smile that Obi-Wan was embarrassed at having cried here in Emjay's quarters shortly before they would have dinner.

"Okay, Obi-Wan. Why don't you go to the bathroom and clean your face a little, hm?" He considered for a moment adding a phrase like 'You did well' or 'I'm proud of you' but figured that this would only increase his student's discomfort. Obi-Wan nodded gratefully and walked slowly to the room his Master had pointed out, after fastening his pants just like Qui-Gon had done only a few minutes ago, although the Jedi Master was sure that it felt like hours for both of them. This could have been worse, far, far worse. He resolutely heaved a heavy sigh and quickly got rid of the hypos. No need to remind Obi-Wan of it any longer.

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A quarter of an hour later the table was set and Ruben had proudly

presented the first of five courses he had planned for this evening. Qui-Gon marveled at the young man's appearance. He did look tired and worn out; nonetheless there was a sparkle in his eyes and he smiled broadly. Obviously he enjoyed cooking, regardless of all the teasing remarks he made about it, especially when referring to his Master. For starters he'd made Raabig eggplants which were basically normal eggplants filled with a Raabian specialty. To say it was delicious was an understatement. The aroma alone was overwhelming.

Although Obi-Wan was obviously trying to appear normal and participate in their small talk, his pale and strained face spoke volumes to all of them and even some of Ruben's better jokes didn't manage to bring a smile to Obi-Wan's lips.

In a lingering silence, Qui-Gon suddenly felt a gathering of the Force as Emjay and Ruben exchanged some sort of signal. He frowned and was anxious to see what the two of them had concocted. He didn't have to wait long to get an answer to his question.

"Obi-Wan?" Ruben spoke up and continued after the youth had lifted his head and looked at him curtly. "You know that there will be this rematch between the Tigers and the Avengers the day after tomorrow, the second final, don't you?" Qui-Gon's apprentice only nodded unenthusiastically once, his mind clearly not entirely on the subject, but Ruben didn't let himself get discouraged. The Jedi Master wondered where this was heading. "You see, Master and I had tickets for box seats but she just informed me that she wouldn't be able to join me. A reception or something, wasn't it, Master?"

Qui-Gon's head shot up and he simply stared blankly at Emjay while she answered with a sad smile on her face. This simply couldn't mean what he thought it meant. "A conference, Padawan, not a reception. An important leaders conference, I might add." Emjay had always been a good liar and it seemed Ruben had learned that particular lesson extremely well, Qui-Gon thought, unable to break his stare.

"Yeah, whatever," Ruben carried on. "In any case... I was wondering if you would care to join me, Obi-Wan?"

Emjay and Ruben could absolutely not be serious about this. Emjay liked Herron in general and the team captain of the Avengers in particular and now she was going to sacrifice this to cheer Obi-Wan up? Also, the sacrifice wasn't only on Emjay's side. Qui-Gon would bet that Ruben wasn't fond of playing nanny for a younger Padawan which would be precisely what he would have to do. Furthermore, the Jedi Master didn't even dare to think what Emjay had paid for box tickets and how many strings she had had to pull to get her hands on them to begin with!

Qui-Gon didn't know how long he had stared at his friend like this but calculating from the mischievous grins on Emjay's and Ruben's faces it certainly had been longer than necessary to start looking dumb. A tug on his left sleeve slowly brought him out of his numbness.

"Master?" Another tug and Qui-Gon ordered his brain to engage. Obi-Wan. Obi-Wan had spoken to him. With an effort he removed his gaze from Emjay and turned his head to look at his apprentice. "Master, may I go?" At first, Qui-Gon was so startled at the sight of

his apprentice's overjoyed features that he forgot to answer which immediately damped the joy on Obi-Wan's face. Suddenly something snapped inside his head and he found that he could speak again.

"Of course, you may, Obi-Wan. As long as Ruben will keep an eye on you."

"It would be my pleasure, Master Jinn," Ruben answered faster than Obi-Wan could ask him. Qui-Gon wasn't sure whether to thank or curse his friend when Obi-Wan broke out in shouts of buoyancy. At last his gratitude won the battle; after all their little scheme had worked out perfectly and that alone deserved some credit.

As did the marvelous food on his plate. He finished the eggplants and grabbed the large water pitcher for the second time, refilling his glass. Emjay's Padawan sure knew how to spice up the simplest meal. Up till now he had avoided the wine. There was ample time for savoring it later on. Four courses to go. Qui-Gon didn't even dare to think about the time Ruben had put into this.

"When will your classes end? I want to be in the arena as early as possible. They've got a whole program running before the game starts."

Qui-Gon knew it was his turn to answer Ruben's question once more, even before he felt his apprentice's stare. "There are only classes in the morning. I have scheduled additional sessions with two of the creche Masters, but they can easily be postponed. That would mean a crowded schedule for about two weeks, Obi-Wan."

His Padawan's excitement didn't lessen a bit. Not that he had intended to quench his student's enthusiasm. "It's worth it, Master. The second final will be the last game in this season." He took a bite from his plate and after swallowing it he added, "and I've never been to the arena before." His voice finally proved how touched he was by Emjay's and Ruben's invitation.

"I'll pick you up at two. We can get in at half past and with our tickets we won't have to queue up." Ruben stood and loaded himself with the remnants of the first course.

Obi-Wan jumped up, supporting the older apprentice in the insurmountable task to clear away the four plates, bowls and the nearly empty water pitcher. "Do you think Gurian will be fit by then?"

Ruben shrugged his shoulders, nearly toppling the pile of plates he was holding. Suppressing a curse he steadied his load. "He might. I hope he will be; he just deserves it. Being the top player during the entire season and then to miss the finals. Seems hardly fair. I saw the press conference. That man was close to..." The voice trailed off as the two Padawans left the living area.

Qui-Gon opened his mouth, but Emjay intercepted him. "No, Qui-Gon, don't. I know what you want to say, what you feel right now. Sometimes boys just have to be boys. And Obi-Wan needed this. Badly. So, just forget about it. And now we'll have this dinner. With no 'thank you for your sacrifice looks' from you. I consider you a good friend. And I like Obi-Wan, very much. That's the last I will say or hear about this whole thing. That's an order. Period. Enjoy

yourself."

"Yes, Ma'am. Just make sure that I laugh at the right places."

"You bet." Both broke out in laughter and as the two apprentices returned Ruben frowned slightly, staring down at the plates he was holding. "It sure isn't the food. Master forbade me to put anything into it that would have psychological side effects."

Emjay and Qui-Gon wiped away some tears, fighting to regain some of their dignity. Ruben and Obi-Wan placed their dishes onto the table. "Starling Fish, fresh mind you. Only steamed, with an assortment of herbs. Nothing that would change its original flavor."

"Sixteen year old, uhhh?" Qui-Gon remarked.

"Fascinating, isn't it? Maybe someone meddled with his records. But I decided not to ask too many questions. Padawans that can cook are hard to come by."

Obi-Wan shot looks between the two grown-ups and his fellow apprentice. Qui-Gon felt a little uncertainty in his Padawan. He thought he knew what troubled him. Despite what he had told him about the pair his student wasn't yet accustomed to the way Emjay treated her Padawan. Well, he would learn quickly that Ruben had his own weapons of defense.

The young man proved him right the next second. "And so hard to entertain. Cooking is an art and artists need inspiration and spirit to do wonders. Would you hand me the wine, Master?" Qui-Gon grinned as he saw Obi-Wan catching his breath.

"Don't bother yourself with it, Padawan. It's far from needing a refill. You may just relax and enjoy the dish, Ruben." Trust Emjay to parry every move of her apprentice. Their verbal exchanges were as skillful as any lightsaber training fight. A glimmer of understanding appeared in his own Padawan's eyes and Obi-Wan's body lost some of its tension. If it hadn't been for Emjay's order he would have given her another grateful look.

This time Qui-Gon tasted the wine; it perfectly matched the fish. He felt the warmth spreading through him and for the first time during the last two days he felt safe enough to let go of his defenses and relax. After the third course, a pasta loaf Ruben had created all on his own, he started to tell a small anecdote he had witnessed a few days ago.

"The room was crowded and the audience all expectant. The appointed speaker for that day was supposed to be the highlight of the seminar. Master Noram is rhetorically brilliant and his ideas are... well, unusual. We all waited for him to start. You could almost feel the tension." He paused to register the attentiveness of his own audience. Even Emjay seemed enraptured. "So he climbed up to the micro and shuffled through his papers. He adjusted the device and began. 'Good Morning.' Before he could go on someone behind him answered, 'Morning.' For a second the audience was stunned. But then all could see the janitor appear on the platform, busy mopping the ground. Noram just stared at the man, totally at a loss. The crowd broke out in laughter, cheers and applause. You should have seen Noram's face. It was priceless. He never got around to giving his

speech. He'd totally lost it." Qui-Gon grinned at the memory. Emjay broke into a fit of laughter.

"I'd have loved to see that. Force! I can almost hear it." Ruben grinned broadly and stood to fetch the next course. Obi-Wan just stared at his Master and swallowed. Qui-Gon smiled at him and touched his cheek fleetingly. That broke the astonishment and the boy joined in the laughter.

Ruben came back and presented the dessert, the souffl   he had called Rising Moon. "The name is not my invention. And I don't know where it comes from. But it's... It's... Well, just taste it and tell me what you think." He placed the tiny dishes in front of everyone and settled down behind his own portion. The next minutes were filled with 'ahhs' and 'ohhs' and Qui-Gon - despite his vast experience with culinary items - had to admit that the dish was most definitely one of the finest he had ever tasted.

Emjay was the first to find her voice. "This is a winner, Padawan. It will come in handy the next time I need to convince Yoda to change the Temple politics." She tugged her apprentice's braid gently. Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan hurried to give their heartfelt compliments. The tall Jedi shuddered at the thought of another course but it turned out to be an assortment of cheeses and fruits, the traditional final part of a dinner.

After the third yawn in a row from his Padawan Qui-Gon prepared to leave soon. "Emjay, I think we must go now. It's past Obi-Wan's bedtime already."

His friend smiled understandingly. "Thank you for your company. I needed it. Business has been hard these last weeks."

Qui-Gon stood and his apprentice followed suit. "Thank you, Ruben. It was... beyond description."

"You're welcome, Master Jinn. Cooking is an art that has to be shared, not hidden."

"Wise words, young man. Wish your insight in some of your other studies were that clear," his Master remarked dryly. Grinning, Ruben disappeared into the kitchen, turning in the doorway once more.

"I'll pick you up, then, Obi-Wan."

"Yes. And thanks, Ruben."

"You're welcome," the other apprentice simply stated and vanished into the other room.

"Shouldn't we help him with the mess?" Obi-Wan inquired.

"Don't worry, Obi-Wan, Ruben and I just clear the table tonight and do the cleaning in the morning." After a short pause Emjay added, "Together."

Obi-Wan smiled, stretched out his hand, and said seriously. "Thank you, Master Mon-Ahan. Good night." The female Jedi took the hand and squeezed it firmly.

"As Ruben said, you're welcome, Obi-Wan." Qui-Gon, who witnessed the whole scene, was surprised that Obi-Wan didn't let go of Emjay's hand. She knelt down to face the boy. "Is there anything else?"

Obi-Wan nodded, his eyes pools of darkness in his pale face. "I... I'd like you to be my L'Biras Anad, Master Mon-Ahan." He still clung to her hand.

"I'm honored, Obi-Wan. And glad." The seriousness didn't leave the apprentice's face. Emjay frowned. Qui-Gon kept his silence, waiting. It wasn't for him to interfere. "Yes?" she finally encouraged the young apprentice.

"You... I... I want you to know that I didn't do it because of the tickets." Obi-Wan sighed audibly when he got that out.

Emjay was nonplussed. "You what?" She broke into laughter and drew the youth into a tight embrace. "I'd never have thought that, Obi-Wan." She let go of him. "And now you better leave. Your Master looks like he's dead on his feet."

Obi-Wan grinned and nodded eagerly. Qui-Gon threw his friend a pointedly grateful look. "Good night, Emjay." She opened the door for them and the next second the two Jedi were on their way home, Obi-Wan walking a little behind his Master. Both kept their silence. Qui-Gon wished he knew what was on his apprentice's mind right now. He didn't want to spy, though. The feelings he received through the bond were promising. Relief and contentment. And amusement.

"Master?"

"Yes, my Padawan?" Qui-Gon slowed his pace until Obi-Wan was at his side.

"Do you think she believed me? That I didn't do it because of the tickets?"

"I am sure of that, Obi-Wan."

"Me too."

Qui-Gon let the following silence linger for a few moments. "When did you decide it then?"

The answer came without hesitation. "When she came last night to fetch Ruben." Qui-Gon understood; it pleased him to see that his Padawan judged his friend by her actions and not by her sometimes rude words.

"Ruben is very dear to her. I was glad when she found him so quickly after her first Padawan was Knighted."

Obi-Wan looked at his Master. "Ruben is only her second Padawan?" Qui-Gon nodded his confirmation. "But she's older than you are, Master. And I'm your third. How is that possible?"

Qui-Gon laid his hand on the boy's shoulder. "There's nothing mysterious about it. My first apprentice and I spent less than a year

together."

A slight ripple in the Force told him that Obi-Wan was shocked by his answer. The reason for it was revealed by his apprentice's next remark. "Dead?" was the only thing he brought out.

"No, Obi-Wan, Kar-Khut isn't dead. Far from it. Actually she just got promoted to senior Knight." He smiled down at his Padawan. "Next time she is back in the Temple you'll probably meet her."

"I would like that, Master. But why was she only with you for such a short time?"

"Well, your assumption that she was dead wasn't that far from the truth. Her Master died in the line of duty and the Council thought that she wasn't ready to face the Trials just then. So I came into play." His apprentice looked up at him, smiling radiantly. Master and Padawan walked home, together.

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